

The Arbiter's Tale

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Summary: This is a story based on the Arbiter character from Halo 2/3 and it focuses on his point of view during that Halo 2/3 period. As this is a story from the Covenants side, all Covenant names will be in their language.

1. Chapter 1 - The 'Vadamees Sentence

Disclaimer: I do not own any of the Halo series games, books, soundtracks or anything else to do with the Halo Universe. I do not own the characters in this fanfiction. All characters are owned by Bungie and 343 Industries. This story is based on the Arbiter character from Halo 2 and 3 and is written from his point of view and it follows his journey through the Halo 2/3 era. I have taken tips into the insight of the Sangheili culture by reading up on Halopedia and the Halo Novels, so please don't flame me for that.

me to improve my writing. Happy Halloween everybody!**_

The Arbiter's Tale

Chapter 1

Thel 'Vadamee's Sentence

The doors silently slid open, revealing the massive High Council Chamber. The Council Chamber was but one of many, many rooms in _High Charity_, the Covenant's mobile capital city and population centre. The gargantuan room had the appearance of a vast stadium, with elevated sections on both sides on which long bleachers were situated.

One side of the room was filled with Sangheili Councilors, which were quietly muttering to one another. The other side had San 'Shyuum' Councilors, or 'Lesser Prophets' which were louder than their Sangheili counterparts; their raised voices echoing across the chamber. Honor Guardsmen were stationed at regular intervals, staring straight ahead, not looking at the newcomer. They clasped energy staves in their four-fingered hands, ready to strike down any creature foolish enough to draw a weapon in the presence of the Hierarchs.

A podium sat in the centre of the chamber, where the condemned was to await judgment. Beyond the podium floated the three San 'Shyuum' adorned in ornate robes, the Hierarchs, leaders of the Covenant Empire.

Each Hierarch was sitting upon ornate gravity thrones that kept them suspended a unit from the ground. The three each wore a heavy crown atop their heads, at the front of which a holographic representation of the Sacred Ring was situated. Each also possessed an ornate mantle that crested their necks.

The wise old Prophet of Mercy, once the city's leading Philologist, was the right-most of the triumvirate. Grey-skinned and wrinkled, his body was bowed with age. Despite this, he scrutinized the newcomer with keen interest. His expression betrayed a subtle hint of sadness, however.

A holographic representation of the Prophet of Regret floated on the left side. Young and somewhat foolhardy, he was not currently present, as he was serving with the Sangheili on his flagship. He was looking around at the councilors with a nonchalant expression on his face.

The Prophet of Truth, the leader of the triumvirate, and the most senior figure in the Covenant Empire was sitting in the shadows behind the other two Hierarchs, eyes fixed on the entrance of the Council Chamber.

The Prophet of Truth looked impassive, but the subject, disgraced Supreme Commander of the Fleet of Particular Justice Thel 'Vadamee knew that this was only an illusion; the level of anger undoubtedly seething within the Hierarch was only veiled by his many years of experience in maintaining a cool political air. As it was, the Sangheili knew that chances of survival were virtually non-existent, regardless of the following proceedings.

Thel was still struggling to comprehend the fact that his greatest military triumph – the campaign at Reach – had become his greatest shame after the events of the Sacred Ring. Due to the efforts of the unholy human animals, in particular the infamous 'Demon,' the Covenant had been denied its chance to achieve the Great Journey.

Because of my own incompetence. He mused.

Thel noticed that Tartarus, Chieftain and Alpha Male of the Jiralhanae was also present, standing slightly off to the right of the Hierarch's. Tartarus silently regarding him with evil little orange eyes. The beast was unshaven, with thick grey hair all over his body and his large head crowned with a massive mohawk. Thel's skin bristled, how such a creature was allowed anywhere near the Hierarchs, he did not know.

Jiralhanae considered themselves to be equals to the Sangheili. The species were a relatively recent addition to the Covenant hegemony. A bestial, primitive species, the Jiralhanae were always feuding with one another. Indeed, when the Covenant had first happened upon the Jiralhanae homeworld, the species were only just recovering from a massive civil war that had almost destroyed their planet. They had no concept of honor and it was absurd to the Sangheili that such creatures could even pretend to try and become equal to them.

As of late the Jiralhanae were vying for the Hierarch's favor, and the Hierarchs seemed to be entertaining this. Such actions were worrying to Thel and his kin. The Sangheili had always been the protectors of the San 'Shyuum, from the earliest days of the Covenant.

Banishing such thoughts from his head, Thel inhaled deeply through his mandibles and stepped into the chamber.

Thel felt all eyes upon him as he walked down the centre of the Council Chamber to the podium on which he was clearly expected to stand. Thel walked tall, keeping his eyes trained unwaveringly on the Hierarch's. Thel didn't show any signs of weakness lest the Council think him a coward. He knew he was almost certainly going to be executed, and he was damned if he was going to be branded as a coward as well as an incompetent.

Thel stepped up onto the podium and waited for the Hierarchs judgment. The Prophet of Regret was the first to speak, and the Council fell silent. "What is your name, Sangheili?"

"Thel 'Vadamee, former Supreme Commander of the Fleet of Particular Justice and kaidon of the state of Vadam." Even as he spoke Thel felt deep discomfort as he knew that both of these titles would be stripped off him.

Thel had met both the Prophets of Truth and Regret before, but that was a long time ago, when Thel had been sent with a group of Zealots by the Prophet of Regret to hunt down a group of heretic Kig-yar who had seemingly joined forces with the humans and were selling them weapons. The Kig-yar had actually been sent with the blessing of the Prophet of Truth to trade with the humans so that the Covenant could learn the locations of human planets.

This confusion of orders had almost lead to Thel's death by the Prophets when they had found out what had happened, but the Prophet of Truth had spared him. However this was only because Thel had saved him from certain death from one of his comrades who, in a moment of madness, attempted to slay the Hierarch.

There would be no such chance of a pardon this time. The sin was too great.

"Let us start at the beginning." The Prophet of Regret said. "You arrived at this human planet, '_Reach_' I believe the humans called it with the Fleet of Particular Justice. Part of a much larger armada of ships, your fleet participated in the orbital battle and subsequent cleansing of the planet.

I understand that a number of human ships fled from the battle, and your fleet gave pursuit. Clarify for me, commander. How many ships were there?"

"There was only one ship". Thel replied truthfully. That one ship would prove to be the cause of the fracas at the Holy Ring that would lead to its destruction, and likely to the end of Thel's life.

"One? Are you sure?" Regret said in a condescending voice. It was clear that Regret was disdainful of the Sangheili. Thel could gauge this in the way he spoke.

"Yes. They called it the Pillar of Autumn." Thel shuddered. Like many of the Covenant, he believed that for any being to possess a name, or be able to name its constructs, it had to be honorable. The humans, befoulers of all that was holy and heathens determined to delay the Great Journey, didn't deserve titles or names, only extinction.

Even more disturbing was that the humans had terms for each member species in the Covenant hegemony. This was a violation of the laws of the gods, and Thel was only too happy to burn down any human that he could.

The humans had put up an effective fight so far, to the extent that they were the Covenant's most dangerous enemy that it had ever encountered. In this respect, Thel did grudgingly have to admit that they were worthy opponents.

The old Prophet of Mercy piped up. "Why was it not destroyed, with the rest of their fleet?" The frail Prophet spoke with an incredibly raspy voice, indicating extreme age. He was regarding Thel with interest.

"It fled, as we set fire to their planet." Thel said, remembering how, aboard his flagship, the _Seeker of Truth, _he had noticed the human cruiser hurtling away from the doomed planet _Reach_. Thel had ordered the nearby ships under his command to pursue the _Pillar of Autumn_. "But I followed with all the ships in my command."

While the rest of the Covenant armada had remained in-system to complete the glassing of the human planet, Thel had mustered the Fleet of Particular Justice and followed the human ship into slipspace. He had no idea of the vessel's destination.

Being superior in speed to their human counterparts, the Covenant ships had arrived at Halo first, and had formed a blockade in order to stop the human ship from touching down on the Holy Ring.

"When you first saw Halo, were you blinded by its majesty?" The Prophet of Regret was clearly trying to undermine him, trying to portray him as a bumbling fool in front of the other Hierarchs. This angered him, as he had not ascended to his current - or former - position through incompetence.

Knowing what a wrong answer could provoke, he decided to play the fool.

"Blinded?"

"Paralysed? Dumbstruck?" Regret said, slightly louder. Now it was blatantly obvious to Thel that Regret was trying to rile him up. If he so much as said one word of clear defiance to the most holy Hierarchs, then they could have him terminated with a simple gesture or command.

Thel would not rise to the bait. Doing so would only make his current situation far worse so he just answered the Hierarch as neutrally as he could.

"No."

"Yet the humans were able to evade your ships." The Prophet of Regret pressed on, simply ignoring Thel. His tone became more hostile, "Land on the Sacred Ring, and desecrate it with their filthy footsteps!" He concluded, bringing his holographic fist down upon the armrest of his gravity throne. The Prophet of Regret was positively shaking with anger now.

Thel was now feeling more than a little apprehensive now. He knew that the Prophet of Regret would certainly have him killed, if not worse. Thel had done his best to stop the human ship, _the Pillar of Autumn_ from touching down on Halo, but the Prophet of Stewardship, who had been attached to his fleet, had forbidden him to fire on the interloper, lest they damage the Holy Ring.

Ultimately Thel had chosen to ignore this order once it became apparent that the humans were intending to make landfall on the ring, but they had been too late, for the human ship was able to land - albeit roughly - on the surface. Had the Prophet not given such an idiotic order, Thel's ships could have easily burned the human ship from the skies before it could even come within close proximity to the ring.

When the human forces had spread onto Halo and established a base, the Covenant dispatched ground troops to root them out. The human forces had offered surprising resistance, and Thel's ground forces had taken heavy losses. The Covenant's situation was further complicated by the release of the Flood, an ancient parasite that had driven the Forerunners themselves into extinction. The Flood was a foul parasite that thrived by consuming other sentient creatures. They infected sentient lifeforms, transforming them into terrible abominations.

Specimens of the Flood had been kept in containment under the surface

of the halo ring. The humans had entered one of these containment facilities, and whether knowingly or not, had released the Flood onto the ring. Within hours the Flood had spread across most of the ring, infesting both human soldiers and Covenant troops.

Facing a catastrophic defeat at the hands of the parasitic lifeform, Thel had had no choice but to evacuate all troops off the surface of the ring.

"Noble Hierarchs, surely you understand that once the Parasite attacked"- The rest of Thel's words were drowned out by loud mutterings from the High Council members. He looked around at the Councilors. Surely enough he could see that some of the Prophet Councilors were standing up, waving fists and shouting. The Sangheili Councilors, showing more restraint, remained seated, growling amongst themselves.

The Prophet of Mercy banged a fist on his armrest. "There will be order in this council!" His tired voice was heavy with anger. The Prophet of Truth, who had until that point been sitting in the shadows, came forward between the Prophets of Mercy and Regret, the tiny blue hologram of Halo on the front of his crown standing out from the surrounding gold. He held up a hand, indicating silence, and as if a switch had been turned, the entire Council fell totally quiet once again.

"You were right to focus your attention on the Flood." He said to Thel. "But this Demon, this 'Master Chief'?"

Thel remembered the heavily armored human who had laid waste to so many Covenant troops. He had seen reports from the field of the 'Spartan.'. The Unggoy were no match for the armored human, and even the powerful Sangheili, Thel's own species, could not seem to overcome it.

Thel felt a sudden stab of anger towards the creature. He had hoped that one day he would be able to face this Demon, this faceless cudgel of destruction. How he longed to run it through with his Energy Sword, to spill its blood and put an end to its pitiful existence. A creature that did not show its face was unholy and not worthy of a warrior's death.

The possibility of this happening was now out of his reach. It had been the Demon who had destroyed the ring. Thel was powerless to intervene, as his forces were in disarray, trying to evacuate the ring while holding back the relentless Flood parasite.

Somehow the damned creature had survived, escaping the halo on one of the human's crude space fighters. It had continued to cause chaos among the Covenant, boarding Ascendant Justice - the flagship of a scouting party sent to the Sacred Ring after its discovery by Thel's battle group and piloting it out of the system.

It was rumoured that this 'Demon' was the last of its kind, as the rest had been killed on Reach. This likely made the human even more dangerous as it sensed its kind's end.

"By the time I learned the Demon's intent, there was nothing I could do." Thel's words seemed to have lit a spark. As suddenly as Truth's upraised hand had quieted the Council, it was suddenly in uproar

again.

The Prophet Councilors got to their feet, yelling at the top of their voices. Even the relatively restrained Sangheili Councilors didn't trouble to keep their voices down. To Thel's deep disgust the Jiralhanae Chieftain Tartarus chuckled happily. The Prophet of Regret leaned over to murmur something in Truth's ear, however Truth held up a hand, cutting Regret off mid-sentence. When he spoke, it was in his usual calm tone.

"You are one of our most treasured instruments. Long have you led your fleet with honor and distinction. But your inability to safeguard Haloâ€| was a colossal failure." Thel's stomach dropped at these words.

The next to speak was the well-known Prophet of Objection. He stood up and raised his fist, waving it at Thel. "Nay, it was heresy!"

This sparked a whole new wave of shouting from the bleachers. Thel had never been called a heretic before. He felt a boiling anger simmer up from deep within him, but he did not dare move his mandibles. He looked around at the Councilors, they were all standing, screaming and some looked ready to jump down and strike Thel down where he stood.

Thel stared defiantly at the Hierarchs and spoke very clearly, so that they would hear him over the noise the Council was making.

"I will continue my campaign against the humans!"

"No! You will not."

The Prophet of Truth issued these words with an air of finality; there was nothing further to say. The Hierarch turned to Tartarus, and the Chieftain gave a loud bark. As if from out of the walls, two more Jiralhanae stepped toward Thel. One tried to grab him, but the Sangheili quickly jerked away, growling threateningly at the beast. Such creatures like that would not touch him. He turned and started to walk away; ready to accept his certain death.

His head was spinning â€“ This was the greatest dishonor Thel had ever suffered in his lifetime. He will not just lose his rank, but his name and his status as Kaidon of the state of Vadam. He heard the Prophet of Truth's voice telling him that he would be left behind upon the beginning of the Great Journey.

His name would be scrubbed off the Vadam Saga and he would be known as one of the greatest failures of all of Sanghelios. To be without a name was a fate worse than death.

Thel knew that it would not only be him that will suffer. His blood line would likely be also killed and the entire Vadam keep would be forever scorned. Thel was in a way grateful that he would not be alive to witness this.

* * *

><p>The High Prophet of Truth Ord Casto watched as the disgraced Supreme Commander of the Fleet of Particular Justice was escorted

away by the Jiralhanae. What else could be done? The Commander had obviously tried to prevent the Sacred Ring's destruction at the hands of the Demon, while simultaneously combatting the Flood as it spread across the ring.

Not hard enough, it appeared, as he had still allowed the ring's destruction, and in doing so delaying the Covenant from walking the Path on the Great Journey.

Despite this failure, Truth still had plans for this Sangheili.

It was clear to Truth that the Sangheili species were no longer capable of keeping the Covenant's enemy at bay, as the humans, in particular this troublesome 'Demon' were still able to cause untold amounts of damage to the Covenant. Truth still possessed the fragments of the Forerunner Crystal the humans had destroyed.

This crystal had been capable of warping the fabric of Slipspace itself, allowing ships to travel hundreds of times faster in Slipspace than normally possible. This great gift from the gods had also been destroyed due to the Sangheili's ineptitude.

This said nothing of the destruction of the space station Unyielding Hierophant and hundreds of Covenant warships.

His personal fleet.

Truth still struggled to comprehend this event.

Truth believed he had found the Portal to the Ark, where the Covenant could begin the Great Journey. It was buried under the surface of another human planet. He was mobilizing his invasion fleet at the Unyielding Hierophant space station. The fleet was a secret even to his fellow Hierarchs.

This fleet would have been powerful enough to easily overcome any defences the humans had and access the Portal. But it wasn't to be. A team of these 'Demons' had somehow infiltrated the Unyielding Hierophant, and were able to destroy it, foiling Truth's plans and delaying his planned assault. The Sangheili had once again failed to stop the humans.

The destruction of the Halo Ring, the most grievous sin of all enacted by the humans, had now come to pass, and again the Sangheili had failed to prevent it from happening.

Truth tugged absentmindedly at the wattle dangling from the corner of his mouth. Not only were the Sangheili incompetent, but that they were a race of heretics. He knew that, within their ranks, many had questioned the Covenant's motives for exterminating humanity. Indeed, Truth almostexpected that the Sangheili had allowed the humans to cause the Covenant to come to such standstills.

They were trying to delay the Great Journey, just as the humans were.

Truth knew that no matter what setbacks ailed the Covenant, it would still make the Journey, and all nonbelievers, the Sangheili included would be damned for their treason. Truth had plans to deal with the Sangheili, however.

The Jiralhanae, in contrast, lacked the foolish concepts of honor the Sangheili possessed. This, along with their blind faith to the Covenant's cause and their naturally fierce warrior prowess made them the perfect race to command the Covenant Military as they had no qualms over the Hierarch's orders. Truth's fleet had consisted of a crew staffed almost completely by Jiralhanae, as part of his grand design.

Truth was already planning for the ascension of the Jiralhanae, gradually replacing tasks the Sangheili had carried out with the Jiralhanae. He was devising a coup that would allow the Jiralhanae to become the military leaders of the Covenant. This would be carried out very soon.

Knowing of the intense rivalry between their races, Truth knew that the Jiralhanae would have no hesitation in carrying out his orders.

For now, the slaying of the heretic leader lurking on the Gas Mine in the gas giant Threshold's atmosphere near the Holy Rings remains, whose signal Truth had picked up would have to do. The blasphemer was spreading such insidious tales that members of the Covenant were revolting, flocking to his false cause. This was yet another source of treachery within the Sangheili.

Revelations such as these could cause the fragmentation of the Covenant, which Truth had worked so hard to not let come to pass. The heretic spoke of what the Forerunner Keyship's Oracle had told Truth so many years ago when he was the Minister of Fortitude. If these revelations came to be believed by the masses, it would spell destruction for the Covenant Empire.

The fool would need to be silenced, and that was where the disgraced Commander of the Fleet of Particular Justice was to come in.

The Sangheili would be branded with the Mark of Shame, but instead of being killed, he would be brought to the Mausoleum of the Arbiter and be bestowed with the title of Arbiter. His failure to protect Halo meant that the Sangheili was more than appropriate for the title. He and a team of Sangheili would assassinate the heretic leader and the Arbiter would die in the process, with any luck. He would kill two birds with one stone.

With that, the High Prophet of Truth sent out the order that the Sangheili be brought to the Mausoleum of the Arbiter after his branding. The Prophet of Truth pressed a button on the armrest of his throne and the platform they were situated upon began to descend silently, as the two Hierarch's began their journey to the holy Mausoleum of the Arbiter to await the battered and tortured former Commander.

2. Chapter 2 - The New Arbiter

Author's Note: Hi guys and gals, Christmas on the horizon and I am expecting Halo 4, which I expect shall blow my mind :D Anyway, here's my next chapter of the Arbiter's Tale. Please r&r â€“ it's warmly appreciated.

**The following is a short glossary for those unfamiliar with Covenant terms of measurement:**

**Unit â€“ Equivalent to one Earth hour, or to a foot in length.**

**Cycle â€“ Equivalent to one Earth day.**

**One cycle contains at minimum 265 units.**

**The above information, along with all other fact's I give throughout this fanfic are taken from Halopedia, (in my opinion the best) Halo encyclopedia. **

****The Arbiter's Tale****

Chapter 2

The New Arbiter

They are coming soon

Sesa 'Refumee knew that the Covenant would surely send a strike team to silence him, but despite this knowledge, he felt he had little to fear. The propaganda he was broadcasting throughout the Covenant battle network was the real truth, not the lies that the Prophets had fabricated and were corrupting the Covenant with.

The Holy Oracle, the interpreters of the Forerunner's will that occupied this gas mine had cleansed his head of the mutinous prattle of the 'Great Journey.' It was a lie, as was everything the Hierarch's had the Covenant fight for. The team that was present with 'Refumee when he met the Oracle too had heard for themselves the truth, and his broadcasts had attracted many Covenant ships in the nearby atmosphere, who had come to hear the truth for themselves.

The Sangheili's mind had not always known such freedom of thought, however.

Indeed, many cycles ago, 'Refumee had led an artifact retrieval team attached to the Fleet of Particular Justice. The commander of this fleet, Supreme Commander Thel 'Vadamee had been a close friend of 'Refumee. He felt remorse for betraying his friend in such a way, but such was necessary. The Prophets were the true betrayers â€“ for too long they had manipulated the Sangheili like puppets. 'Refumee and his team had been sent to this Forerunner gas mine with the blessing of the Prophet of Stewardship for studying and documentation purposes.

It was while they were searching the mine that he had come across the Holy Oracle, '343 Guilty Spark', as it referred to itself as. 'Refumee had sought to learn about the Great Journey, and was shocked when the Oracle had revealed that it did not know of such a thing, and was even more shocked when, asking the Oracle about the Holy Ring, it had told him that the ring had not been built to allow a species to ascend into a higher plane of existence, but instead was designed as a diabolical weapon to be used to annihilate all sentient life. Such revelations the Sangheili could not comprehend. So everything the Hierarch's had them was a lie? 'Refumee had stood

weak-kneed as the Oracles story unfolded.

Upon hearing all 343 Guilty Spark had to say, 'Refumee had immediately ordered that they cut off all contact with the Fleet of Particular Justice. Everything they had stood for was false. Their so-called 'Prophets' were false. Such deceiving bottom-feeders never should have been trusted, he thought. 'Refumee had his team set about fortifying the gas mine with weapon emplacements to meet the attack he was sure were to come. The Prophets would be eager to purge any affront to their beliefs, if only to cover their own tracks.

Now, as the station was fully fortified, he welcomed the false Covenant to come and test his strength. He felt slight remorse for those misguided soul's that were going to perish in the ensuing bloodshed. It was necessary, however. For the truth to be acknowledged by all, sacrifices needed to be made. With any luck, his words of wisdom would ring true with the strike team, and they would stand down and hear for themselves the truth they had so long been deprived of. Indeed, the Oracle would be able to speak for him.

If not, then they would have to die. This was necessary for the movement to survive. Soon, all of their trouble and toil would be worth it. The false Covenant will collapse under the weight of its fabrications, and the San 'Shyuum will be exposed to all as the liars they were.

* * *

><p>Thel 'Vadamee's Jiralhanae escorts opened up a door which lead to the ledge with a post where he was to be punished for his sins. A deafening noise met Thel's ears as soon as the doors opened. It appeared that the news of Thel's sentence had spread around High Charity, as there was hundreds, if not thousands of Covenant, mainly the lower castes, crammed into the room.</p>

Honor Guardsmen were stationed in this room at regular intervals, keeping the hordes of Covenant off the main pathway which lead to the ledge. As Thel made his way forward, the Covenant, especially the Unggoy, pitiful creatures of little use in a firefight, attempted to get as close to Thel as they could to insult and jeer at him.

It was _very _seldom that lower caste species could speak against the Sangheili without retaliation. He heard a particularly gutsy Unggoy screaming "Heretic!" at him and took all the strength in his body to resist breaking the hapless creature's neck. Here he was, a once noble Sangheili Supreme Commander, now being ridiculed by the lowest creatures without being able to so much as utter a retort.

As he approached the ledge, Thel could see that the stadium seats opposite him were absolutely full of Covenant, all of whom were shouting. _Well over a million were here to watch my greatest moment of shame, _Thel realised.

As soon as Thel reached the ledge the Jiralhanae grabbed Thel's forearms and forced them into a pair of hovering cuffs. Tartarus looked around the mass of Covenant who were watching. Sneering, he turned back to Thel. "You've drawn quite a crowd, _Supreme Commander,_ " he added mockingly.

"If they came to hear me beg, they will be disappointed." Thel

retorted. He was certainly not going to beg, especially to this filthy beast. If Thel did beg, the least he would deserve was to be killed. His family would be killed and Thel would be known to all as a coward as well as a heretic. Thel was going to take the pain he was due and accept it, and at least this would not besmirch his name further.

"Are you sure?" Tartarus said lightly. "We shall soon see."

Thel was certain that Tartarus was going to take his toll on him, and try to inflict as much pain on Thel as possible, but Thel was not going to give the Jiralhanae the satisfaction of hearing a Sangheili break to them.

Tartarus gave a huff and pressed a button on the nearby post. Waves of energy lanced from the holocuffs on Thel's wrists and burned him on both sides of his body.

The following pain was some of the most deliberating Thel had ever felt, but he would not yell out so he kept his mandibles closed. The pain was incessant, and seemed to go on forever. Thel opened his eyes and glanced down; his ornate combat armor was becoming blackened and distorted because of the extreme heat, the armor that Thel had worn ever since he had been promoted to Zealot level, and the armor he had worn as he slaughtered thousands of enemies of the Covenant was permanently destroyed. With that sight filling his head, Thel closed his eyes and let the pain continue.

After what seemed like an eternity the intense light disappeared and Thel opened his eyes once again. Every fibre in his body seemed to be on fire, and he could barely hear the screaming Covenant all around him. Thel knew that it was likely that he was now incapable of walking — only the holocuffs which held his arms up supported Thel and stopped him from collapsing to the floor. Tartarus' voice rung out from somewhere near Thel.

"This coward has disgraced us all! There can be no greater heresy!" He bellowed. "Let him be an example for all who would break our Covenant!"

At these words the crowds cheered again, the noise reverberating around the vast area. Tartarus gave a short bark and his Jiralhanae cohorts each grabbed one of Thel's blackened chest plates and pulled. Because of the extreme heat that had been applied to the armor, it simply came off in pieces. The arm guards followed, then the leg armor, the back armor and finally Thel's combat helmet was pulled off and dropped to the floor. The Jiralhanae than tore off Thel's underarmor bodysuit, leaving the Sangheili naked. Naked and worthless.

Tartarus then retrieved a brand from the post and faced Thel. Thel knew what it was, the Mark of Shame. The Mark was only given to a creature that had committed the greatest of sins, before they were executed and their names destroyed. Thel raised his head and he could see the distinctive lines of the Mark on the tip of the brand.

The brand was burning with a fierce intensity; and with a fury to match it Thel stared into the Jiralhanae Chieftain's eyes. The brand was without hesitation slammed into Thel's chest. The pain of the brand carving into his skin was excruciating.

Thel tried to refrain from screaming in pain but he gave in, he couldn't stop himself; he roared long and loud as the pain continued, and finally, to his great relief, his world went black.

* * *

><p>Thel woke up to flashing lights. When he tried to inhale, he almost passed out again; the burning sensation on his chest was unbearable, that spineless curr Tartarus had really driven his thoughts for Thel deep. Out of the corner of his eye, he could see the lines criss-crossing his chest. Never, in all of his born days, would Thel have imagined he would be branded the Mark of Shame.

He knew where he was going, for his final judgment and execution. He had no idea who was going to execute him, but he knew he would likely be hanged and his corpse fed to the Kig-Yar. The shame was intolerable; he was now nameless, without identification. There was seldom anything more dishonorable for a Sangheili. He was roused from his stupor by a deep, gravelly voice coming from his left. "How much further must we heft this baggage? Any cell will do."

Thel lifted his head up slightly, and almost recoiled: the filthy Jiralhanae were dragging him. There was one on either side of him, each with one of Thel's arms slung over their shoulders. Tartarus was leading the way, his massive grey bulk taking up most of the corridor they were in. Thel looked around, and noticed that they were indeed passing through a detention center.

So this was his fate, to rot away in a cell for evermore. Thel would sooner die. The Jiralhanae holding Thel's right arm replied to the first, "Why not toss him in with this lot?" They passed a cell containing three ravenous Kig-Yar, who hissed and screeched at the passing Jiralhanae, "They could use the meat."

"Them? What about us?" Growled the first Jiralhanae, "My belly aches, and his flesh is seared just the way I like it."

Thel fought back a feeling of revulsion; this was all the Jiralhanae cared about, their bellies. Why the San 'Shyuum would accept such feral creatures into the Covenant was beyond Thel. They should have been purged upon the Covenant's discovery of them. The Jiralhanae were treacherous and disloyal, also. Thel had discovered this a long time ago.

"Quiet!" Barked Tartarus from the front, silencing the squabbling Jiralhanae. "You two whimper like Unggoy fresh of the teat. He's not meant for the jails."

He turned and regarded Thel, a grin on his face, "The Hierarchs have something special in mind for you."

Upon hearing this, Thel's mind started up again. What could the Hierarchs possibly want with him again? Thel had already been sentenced by them and was now supposed to be killed. Perhaps his treachery had been so great that the Hierarchs were to execute him themselves?

Thel just wished for the end to come swiftly; not to suffer further

denouncements. His insides squirmed uncomfortably.

The Jiralhanae moved out of the detention centre and out onto a ledge overlooking the Mausoleum of the Arbiter. The vast, vaguely cylindrical structure sat in the centre of the large walls of High Charity, with the Unggoy's methane filled atmosphere far below obscuring the Mausoleums bottom. The Mausoleum was only connected to the rest of High Charity by a series of bridges. Thel was puzzled why they were approaching the Mausoleum of the Arbiter; surely he was not to becomeâ€œ!

The Jiralhanae dragged Thel onto a nearby Gravity Lift that took them down onto one of the walkways leading up to the Mausoleum. The Gravity Lift was an example of the Covenant's advanced technology, technology that the Covenant had reverse engineered from the Forerunners, the holy gods that were the focal point of the Covenant's religion. The Covenant believed that they were to activate the Holy Ring to follow in the Forerunner's footsteps, to achieve the 'Great Journey.'

The humans had made every attempt to impede the Covenant's progress, and were considered an affront to the gods, so it decreed by the Prophets that the humans were to be eradicated, thus the Covenant had started a genocidal campaign to eliminate the humans from wherever they were found, but like some weed, more seemed to spring up somewhere else. Thel had privately wondered why the Covenant had not granted the humans acceptance into the hegemony, for they were certainly more competent foot soldiers than the Unggoy and Kig-Yar.

Thel and his Jiralhanae handlers silently descended down the Gravity Lift and moved towards the Mausoleum of the Arbiter. The bridge was manned by Sangheili Honor Guardsmen, who stood unflinchingly straight as they walked past, their eyes staring straight forward. The door to the Mausoleum cycled open and they proceeded. Tartarus turned to Thel.

"I do hope that you are not scared of death, 'Commander,'" he chuckled to himself, "The Hierarchs likely have a most painful way of killing heretics such as yourself."

Thel did not bother to reply. After the torture and branding, his strength was completely sapped, and he was just waiting to die, not waste his breath conversing with this beast. He still thought of his bloodline. What would become of them? Would they be punished as well? Would they be executed, or would they simply be banished from the Vadam keep? Thel did not wish to dwell on such matters.

He had always thought that if he was going to die, it would be a glorious death in the midst of battle, but now he was to be executed, guilty of the highest form of treason. This was no way for a noble warrior to die. The inner doors opened and Thel immediately caught sight of the Prophets of Truth and Mercy. There was no sign of Regret's hologram â€œ he must have had other matters to attend to. Thel was somewhat relieved by this, as Regret was less tolerant than the other two Hierarchs, and his words would be far less restrained.

The Jiralhanae walked up to the Hierarchs with Tartarus in the lead, and once in front of the Hierarchs they simultaneously dropped into a

low bow, forcing Thel to do likewise. Tartarus was the first to speak, "Noble Prophets of Truth and Mercy, I have brought the incompetent."

"You may leave, Tartarus." The Prophet of Truth replied, a firm edge to his voice.

Tartarus looked up in shock, "But, I thought-"

The Prophet of Truth cut him off mid-sentence, "and take your Jiralhanae with you."

Tartarus looked utterly disbelieving, but out of respect for the Prophets, he did not retort. He stared for a moment longer than once again bowed. He glanced back in hatred at Thel.

"Release the prisoner."

The two Jiralhanae supporting Thel dropped him, and turned to follow Tartarus out of the Mausoleum. The Jiralhanae walked silently past Thel, who gingerly touched the Mark of Shame that was burned into his chest. His whole body was in pain, but the Mark burned with an almost unbearable potency. Once the Jiralhanae were out of earshot, it was Truth who spoke first.

"The Council decided to have you hung by your entrails and your corpse paraded through the city." Thel felt his spirits sink, but Truth continued, "But ultimately, the terms of your execution are up to me."

Thel was now feeling more than wretched, he had nothing to live for, "I am already dead."

The Prophet of Truth answered immediately, "Indeed. Do you know where we are?" Thel did, and he was wondering why.

"The Mausoleum of the Arbiter."

"Quite so. Here rests the vanguard of the Great Journey. Every Arbiter from first to last. Each one created and consumed in times of extraordinary crisis."

Thel looked around at the high walls of the room, which were packed, one beside the other from the floor to the ceiling high above, with the caskets that housed the remains of the Covenant's previous Arbiters, whenever their bodies could be retrieved.

Thel knew about the Arbiters. He had studied them, along with his colleagues in the College of War on Sanghelios. They were Sangheili that were found guilty of the greatest sins and were selected to be the Arbiter so that they could regain a portion of honor they had lost.

Arbiters were assigned high risk, suicidal missions; they were expected to die while carrying out their task, for there was no better death than in battle. This death while in service would regain an amount of the honor lost and they would be remembered for the deeds that they carried out, lessening the consequences for their bloodline.

Thel was beginning to understand now why he was summoned here. The Prophet of Mercy piped up from beside Truth, his frail voice breaking the silence,

"The Taming of the Lekgolo, the Unggoy Rebellion. Were it not for the Arbiters, the Covenant would have broken long ago!"

Mercy positively shouted. Thel knew what was certainly going to happen.

"Even on my knees, I do not belong in their presence."

"Halo's destruction was your error," Truth started, "and you rightly bear the blame. But the Council was—"he paused for a moment, "-overzealous. We know you are no heretic."

Thel looked up at these words. He was utterly convinced that everybody thought him a heretic, and he believed that he was indeed one. Before he could ponder those words further, Truth spoke again.

"This is the true face of heresy, one who would subvert our faith and incite rebellion against the High Council."

Thel was puzzled for a moment, but Truth tapped a button on his gravity throne, and a miniature hologram of a Sangheili appeared. The Sangheili was adorned in an unusual armor configuration; the little-used suits designed for deep-space artefact retrieval.

"Our Prophets are false! Open your eyes, my brothers!" He gestured, as though giving a sermon, "They would use the faith of our forefathers to bring ruin to us all! The Great Journey is a—"

Truth pressed the button again, and the hologram vanished. Thel was frozen with shock: the speaker had been Sesa 'Refumee, one of Thel's closest friends. He had leaded an artefact retrieval group whom had been with Thel's Fleet of Particular Justice. When the fleet had arrived at the Halo Ring, 'Refumee's team had investigated a nearby gas mine in the name of the Covenant. Thel could not understand what could cause a formerly loyal soldier to turn away from his groundings like this. When the Prophet of Truth next spoke, it was in a low, dangerous voice.

"This heretic, and those who follow him, must be silenced."

"Their slander offends all who walk the Path!" added the Prophet of Mercy.

Thel was mulling this new information over in his head. What of Sesa 'Refumee? Thel had known him since childhood, when they had trained together. He was no heretic. Surely something was wrong here. Even more strange was the fact that Thel had been shamed, tortured and sentenced to death; he did not possibly understand how he could be of any use to the Hierarchs.

"What use am I? I can no longer command ships, lead troops into battle—"Truth cut him off with a wave.

"Not as you are, no. But become the Arbiter, and you shall be set loose against this heresy with our blessing."

So Thel was to become the next Arbiter of the Covenant? He was to perish in glorious combat, spared from the fate of being shamefully executed for treason? Thel was willing to accept that title, not only for himself, but for the entire house of Vadam. It was either this or a most humiliating death likely to be carried out by some filthy Jiralhanae.

Thel looked up to see a large pod descending from the roof of the Mausoleum. It came to rest in front of Thel, and with a soft hiss, the front slid open, bathing him in a blinding white light. Thel recognized what was housed within - a set of ancient silver armor, with an aesthetic no modern Sangheili combat armor possessed. This was the Arbiter's armor. Thel turned to the Hierarchs,

"What of the Council?" Surprisingly, it was the Prophet of Mercy, who spoke first,

"The tasks you must undertake as the Arbiter are perilous, suicidal!" He snapped, a bitter edge to his voice, "You will dieas each Arbiter has before you. The Council _will _have their corpse."

Thel got to his feet, grunting quietly at the effort, and moved towards the pod containing his to-be the final body armor he would ever wear. He stopped when he was a foot away, and looked around at the surrounding walls. Thel understood that this is where his body would be laid to rest, along with all of the Covenant's past Arbiters.

He then turned his attention back to the armor in front of him. He reached out and took the helmet, which was oddly shaped, with a large 'beak' that covered most of the front of the face, and with holy symbols emblazoned on it. He put the helmet on his head, moved it into a comfortable position, and with renewed zeal, turned to the Hierarchs, "What would you have your Arbiter do?"

"Your task is simple, Arbiter: You are to infiltrate the gas mine where the heretic has taken refuge. You will be accompanied by a Special Operations team, and you are to silence the heretic, and his lackeys that were stupid enough to speak out against the Covenant. You have one unit to get ready. Prove that you truly do stand for the Covenant."

Truth glanced at Mercy, and continued to assess the new Arbiter as he adorned his armor. Thel dressed into the flexible bodysuit, and then fitted the rest of his armor plates on. He then checked that his personal energy shield was functioning properly. He then noticed that the suit had an active camouflage module built into it; however he discovered that it could only be activated for ten seconds, unlike the modules used by Special Operations Sangheili which could be activated indefinably.

This was likely due to the fact that the armor was ancient, and its technology had not been updated, to keep it authentic.

Once ready, Thel turned and with the nod of the Hierarchs, started to head towards the weapons armory where he would meet his team and select his weapons.

He still could not comprehend the position he was now in. He was the

Arbiter, the will of the Prophets. He knew that the Special Operations team he was to work with would hold a certain level of discontent towards him, but they would not dare voice it. Thel knew that they would focus on their mission objectives, and leave any grudges for later. He pondered what he would do when he caught up with Sesa 'Refumee: Question him on his actions? Attempt to make him see sense? Or would he gun his old friend down on sight? Thel wasn't sure that he could bring himself to do that.

The Special Operations branch of the Covenant was the Covenant's most professional fighters â€“ they would not fail their task. Thel was glad to have their assistance. Thel knew that he was supposed to perish in this mission, as was customary for one with the title of Arbiter, but he now felt that he had something to live for, and he would do his utmost best not to blunder in combat.

* * *

><p>Once the Mausoleum doors were closed, The Prophet of Truth turned to regard his fellow Hierarch.</p>

"So there goes another disgraced Sangheili warrior, off to find his glorious death in the midst of combat as the Arbiter."

Truth sneered. Truly the Sangheili's concept of honor was too foolish to be believable. Proud creatures, ones that would not find it so easy to adapt when they have had their noses crooked out of place. Still they wouldn't have to suffer for long, as his purging of the species would be quick. The Prophet of Truth knew of the atmospheric instability of the gas giant Threshold, and with any luck the heretic's, along with the Arbiter and the Special Operations Commander Rtas 'Vadumee, another proud fool would find their deaths there, if not to one another than to some massive super storm.

If Truth could have the main Sangheili leaders silenced beforehand, then it would make his attack on their race significantly easier. The Sangheili would be in disarray, easy pickings for the newly promoted, Covenant-loyal Jiralhanae.

Truth was already in the process of rebuilding his fleet for the assault on the human planet where the Portal was known to be located. This Portal would lead to the 'Ark,' which was the Covenant Empire's means of initiating the Great Journey, where the San 'Shyuum would achieve godhood. Such was the Covenant's legacy. Of course, the human scourge would have to be cleansed before the excavation of the Ark could begin.

Truth's plans were hindered somewhat by the actions of one of his fellow Hierarchs. The Prophet of Regret, young and rash, had taken a haphazard fleet of ships and assaulted the planet, which seemed to be a human military fortress or a home world. It had more defenses in orbit than perhaps any other human world encountered thus far, except perhaps the planet of 'Reach.' With any luck Regret's fleet would weaken the planet's orbital defenses enough for Truth to be able to punch through them and descend to the surface.

Regret will be killed, of course, but this would in fact benefit Truth, as he would have one less obstacle to deal with in his quest for totalitarian dominance over the Covenant. It will also be at this stage that Truth will begin his extermination of the Sangheili race,

using the blindly loyal and devout Jiralhanae as his instrument.

Within a matter of cycles, the issue would be resolved and the Covenant would be powering their way to victory and godhood, with the High Prophet of Truth Ord Casto at the helm.

* * *

><p>One unit later, Thel was standing in the troop bay of the Type 52 'Phantom' Troop Carrier. Behind him, lining the walls of the bay was two lines of Special Operations Sangheili, with a line of Special Operations Unggoy between them.</p>

The Special Operations complement was to split into four separate lances of two Sangheili and two Unggoy, and each lance was to search a separate section of the gas mine for the heretic leader. The lances were simply labeled Teams 1, 2, 3 and 4. Thel was to command Team 1, the alpha strike.

There was a massive maelstrom raging on the gas giant Threshold, and it was due to strike the gas mine within five to seven units, so the teams did not have a lot of time. It was a simple matter of finding the heretic leader. Thel was hoping to be to question 'Refumee on his motives, as he was still very curious why the Sangheili had rebelled like this. He knew he would find his answers, regardless.

The Phantom was making haste towards the mine, and was almost there now. Thel turned as the door into the cockpit cycled open, and Special Operations Commander Rtas 'Vadumee stepped into the compartment. 'Vadumee had been aboard Thel's flagship, the Seeker of Truth during the battle at the Sacred Ring, and it had been him that had investigated the Agricultural Support Ship, the Infinite Succor, which had been attacked by the ravenous Flood parasite.

'Vadumee had lost his whole team aboard that ship, and he had lost his two left mandibles to one of his own infected comrades. Rtas 'Vadumee was a battle hardened veteran and Thel was glad to have him commanding the team. 'Vadumee looked at Thel for a moment, and then addressed his soldiers, walking between them as he spoke,

"When we joined the Covenant, we took an oath!" He rumbled. His Sangheili replied as one, in an equally loud voice,

"According to our station! All without exception."

"On the blood of our fathers, on the blood of our sons...we swore to uphold the Covenant!" 'Vadumee continued, his chest heaving.

"Even to our dying breath!" The Sangheili resonated.

"Those who would break this oath are heretics." 'Vadumee said a little quieter. "Worthy of neither pity, nor mercy! Even now they use our lords' creations to broadcast their lies!" He shook with concealed rage. His Sangheili finished the sentence,

"We shall grind them into dust!" 'Vadumee paced to the front of the Phantom's troop bay, considered the deck for a moment, then turned to face his warriors, and shouted,

"And continue our march to glorious salvation!" 'Vadumee walked from the front of the ship over to where Thel was standing. He knew that the other Sangheili was sizing him up, deciding whether he was worthy enough to be assisting the Special Operations Unit. 'Vadumee faced his former commander. "This armor suits you, but it cannot hide that mark." He said quietly to Thel.

Thel felt his hearts beating a little faster; he was still adjusting to the fact that he was branded with the Mark of Shame, and he now forever burdened because of it. The other Sangheili on board the Phantom knew this.

"Nothing ever will."

"You are the Arbiter, the will of the Prophets." 'Vadumee said, his eyes boring into Thel's, he moved closer, so that they were face to face, "But these are my Sangheili. Their lives matter to me, yours does not._"

Thel looked back unflinchingly at the Commander.

"That makes two of us."

'Vadumee gave a huff of respect and walked back into the cockpit. This was it; the Phantom was almost at the drop off point. It sailed smoothly over the strange geometric shapes of the gas mine. They had not come under any anti-aircraft fire, so the heretics clearly did not know they were coming. The brewing maelstrom must have cut of their lines of communications, and it would likely do the same to the Special Operation team's communications as well, so once they were dropped off, they were on their own.

The Phantom came to a stop on a flat surface on one of the gas mines many supporting arms. A fierce wind was already nudging the Phantom around as it stabilized and powered on its Gravity Lift. The two Unggoy in Thel's team dropped first, then the Sangheili, and finally Thel himself. As soon as his feet hit the grooved surface, he drew his energy sword hilt and hit the activation button. A concentrated flash of light materialized before his eyes, and Thel looked down at the blade, he was going into combat once more.

**A/N: Hope you all are enjoying my fanfic so far. Please point out any flaws and suggest ways in which I can improve my writing. Does anybody have objections to my switching between Thel and other characters such as the Prophet of Truth. If so please let me know. If you feel it detracts attention from Thel then please, let your thoughts be known. I personally like it, seeing what the antagonists are planning, but truly, I will try to dedicate most of the limelight to the main character, the namesake of the fanfic itself: Thel 'Vadamee.*

**Another A/N: Just to clear things up â€“ Thel and the Spec Ops Commander have very similar surnames, and as I use both frequently in this fanfic, readers who are perhaps unsure of their names may be confused. Thel's surname is 'Vad-A-mee, and the Spec Ops Commanders name is Rtas 'Vad-U-mee. I hope this clears things up for anyone confused by the similar text. Cheers guys :)*

'_**Sup peeps! Here's the next chapter, where there will finally be some of those good ol' Halo shootouts people seem to like. Perhaps a bit of a twist in here that not many people would expect. Please r&r, it's always appreciated, whether good or bad (well maybe not bad :P) It's just good to know that I've got readers that are actually taking the time to review and point out any issues that they may have. I always want to find out how to improve my writing.*_

The Arbiter's Tale

Chapter 3

Hunting Heretics

Rtas 'Vadumee's voice came in through Thel's helmet microphone. It was laced through with static and very grainy, no doubt due to the gas giant's atmospheric conditions, but Thel could understand what was being said.

"We are the arm of the Prophets, Arbiter, and you are the blade. Be silent and swift, and we shall quell this heresy without incident."

The new Arbiter followed his soldiers across the platform, and then down a ramp. They approached a closed portal leading in the wall. 'Vadumee spoke again,

"The storm has masked our approach, and it should have their local Battle-net in disarray. We have the element of surprise... for now."

There was a control panel nearby, and one of the Sangheili moved to activate it while the other's stood ready to deal with any attackers. Thel knew who the two Sangheili were, as they were acquainted shortly before on the Phantom. Officer Dru 'Gelamee was, excepting Thel, the commander of the lance.

'Gelamee was an accomplished sniper, and he clutched a Type-50 'beam rifle' in his four fingered hands. Although he was primarily a sniper, 'Gelamee knew how to fight in close quarters if the need arose. The other Sangheili was Trooper Ika 'Naskaree. 'Naskaree was relatively new to the Special Operations Division, but he proved to be an aggressive and skilled warrior, as he had displayed in the training ring.

'Naskaree also had a natural talent for working with technology and computer systems, and at the moment he was easily hacking his way through the door's security protocols. It cycled open, and the Unggoy filed in, followed by the Sangheili, and finally Thel. As soon as he was in the doors slammed shut and Thel experienced vertigo as the small room they were in, apparently an elevator began to descend.

Thel was unsure of how much opposition they could expect from the heretics â€“ they had not been fired at when approaching on the Phantom, so the heretics either did not know that there was a Special Operations team here, or they were getting ready to fight a brutal close quarter's war. The former seemed more likely, as the storm had almost certainly stalled their communications. As the elevator

silently moved down through the station, Dru 'Gelamee addressed his team,

"Engage active camouflage. Reveal yourselves only after the Arbiter has joined battle with the enemy." Upon these words, the entire Special Operation's team faded into the background, so that all Thel could see was four slight blurs. The Special Operations Commander was the next to speak. His voice crackled in Thel's helmet,

"You may wish to do the same, Arbiter. But take heed: your armor's system is not as...new as ours. Your camouflage will not last forever." Thel was well aware of this, and he knew that he had to be careful not to expose himself to the enemy. The elevator stopped, and Thel ducked around the corner as the door opened. For a moment there was silence, and then Thel heard voices, Sangheili voices.

"Any word on our missing brothers yet?" The first voice was followed by a second; the Sangheili were clearly in the middle of a conversation, as they had not noticed the open door.

"Still nothing. Given what we have learned, I fear they are lost." Thel knew not what the heretics were talking about, but Thel was not interested: these heretics had sinned by speaking against the Prophets, and for that, they were going to die. The first Sangheili continued,

"Maybe the Oracle will protect usâ€|" At these words, Thel perked up, his hearts beating a little faster. A Holy Oracle, here? Was this Sangheili speaking the truth? Holy Oracles were Forerunner constructs, and were possibly the only ones left, so they all but the voice of the Forerunners. The Oracles conveyed the Forerunners will, and were dedicated to aiding the Covenant in achieving the 'Great Journey.' How could the heretics have come into the possession of one? Thel could not allow the heretics to corrupt the Oracle with their lies. The other Sangheili replied to the first,

"Perhaps. But his Sentinels are too few. Better we protect ourselves!" Thel than heard footsteps; one of the Sangheili was moving off. Thel peered around the corner to take a peek. The room was mainly empty, with odd protrusions coming out of the floor at random intervals.

There was a walkway opposite the door the Special Operations team was waiting in, with a Sangheili walking up the ramp onto it. The Sangheili was donned in the armor of the deep-space artefact retrieval teams, similar to that of the hologram of 'Refumee' that Thel had seen back on High Charity.

The armor was a dull brown color, with luminous purple lights running throughout it. The armor plates on the Sangheili's back had four fins protruding from them. The heretic did not wear a helmet, but instead had a breathing apparatus that supplied oxygen directly to his lungs, and goggles over his eyes.

The Sangheili had a Type-51 carbine slung over his back and a plasma pistol attached to his leg armor by magnetic clips. There was also two Unggoy dozing in the corner, also wearing different armor to the Covenant Unggoy, brown colored with two tubes of chilled methane instead of the standard methane tanks of the Covenant.

The Unggoy had followed their Sangheili masters out of fear, as their species were notoriously cowardly.

There was another heretic Sangheili directly ahead of Thel, fiddling with his own carbine. Thel beckoned to his two Sangheili, and then at the Sangheili on the catwalk and the sleeping Unggoy. He was going to silence the one near the door. Thel activated his active camouflage and immediately its ten second counter started, so he would have to move quickly.

Thel moved up behind the heretic Sangheili with his energy sword drawn. The Sangheili looked up just as Thel leapt at him, wrapping his hand over the heretic's mouth while simultaneously ramming his blade through his back. The Sangheili jerked in surprise, trying to get out of Thel's grasp, already knowing he was doomed.

Thel moved the sword up; burning through the heretic's multiple hearts, killing him instantly. Thel set the corpse onto the ground and looked around. Two Unggoy and another Sangheili lay dead on the ground, seeping pale blue and purple blood respectively.

Thel beckoned to 'Gelamee who moved cautiously up the catwalk, active camouflage activated to scout the next area. The team held position for a moment, until 'Gelamee came back down the catwalk to address the team,

"There is several Unggoy patrolling the next area, Arbiter. There is also two Sangheili. My brother, I do not know how you feel killing our own brethren, but I despise it. How could they have strayed this far from the Great Journey?"

Thel paused. He was wondering the same thing. An Oracle, if Thel had interpreted the Sangheili he had killed correctly, was in the heretic's possession. Thel had many questions for the heretic leader 'Refumee, his old friend, and many more for the Oracle. And as 'Gelamee had said, Thel despised having to kill his own species, former soldiers of the Covenant. Still, they had sinned, spoken out against the prophets, and there was no greater treachery, so they had to pay, each and every one of them,

"I do not know, brother, but we will find out why soon enough. But for now, we continue the mission. 'Gelamee, train your rifle on those Sangheili. The remainder of the team will move as close as we can to the rest of the heretics. When we are ready, fire and with any luck neutralize them before they can muster a response. Their deaths should send the Unggoy into disarray."

"The vermin will panic and try to flee, and this is when the rest of us will attack. You!" Thel barked at one of the Special Operations Unggoy who was carrying a portable plasma cannon over its shoulder. "Set that plasma cannon up on the catwalk overlooking the next area, and when the first shot is fired you unleash a rain of fire on the heretics. And Unggoy, do try not to hit any of us with any stray bolts, or the consequences will be most dire."

Thel clicked his communications device off, and deactivated his energy sword. He watched as the blade dissipated in a blue mist and then attached the hilt to his thigh plate. He then drew his plasma rifle, ensured that it was fully charged and brought it to bear. He led the way up the catwalk, activated his camouflage, jumped down

into the heretic controlled area, and ducked behind a nearby pillar. He chanced a look.

The room was spacious with a high roof, and it had many protrusions jutting out of the floor. Three plasma-based conveyor belts ran the length of the room, slowly carrying large tanks of methane gas to a pit at the far end. Thel could see several patrolling Unggoy, as well as the two Sangheili 'Gelamee had mentioned standing near the far end, conversing with one another.

Thel checked to see that 'Gelamee was in position, his sights trained on the distant Sangheili, and waited for the Unggoy to set up its plasma cannon. He ensured his team was behind similar cover to him. Silently he counted to three, and then sent a burst of static through his communications device to 'Gelamee. One second passed, and then a beam of bluish-purple light flashed across the room from the catwalk across the room, striking one of the heretic Sangheili in the side of the head. The shot completely bypassed his personal energy shield, drilling straight through his head and out of the other side, sending blood and brain matter across the floor. Steam whistled out of the neat hole punched through the Sangheili's head, and he crumpled to the floor before he knew what had hit him. His associate jumped backwards as the second shot was fired, which missed but the Sangheili had made a fatal error — he had jumped into the pit at the end of the room. He screamed as he fell, and his voice carried across the room. Thel crouched around the box, plasma rifle ready to fire when the plasma cannon started.

A murderous barrage of plasma bolts tore down the room, sweeping left and right. The Unggoy who had stood stunned as their masters were killed were now brought back into terrifying reality, and scattered as their fellows were cut down.

Thel wondered what the turret operator was thinking as he mowed down his former comrades. Thel noticed one heretic Unggoy creeping up behind another barricade, trying to get close enough to fire. Thel let loose several shots from his plasma rifle, the white hot bolts of plasma burning through the Unggoy's armor and then his hardened skin, riddling his scrawny torso and neck. He dropped with a gurgling cough, blue blood smearing the floor.

Gradually the noise subsided, than stopped completely. Thel surveyed the carnage. There was a whole group of torn up Unggoy corpses, some with missing limbs, others with no heads and still more shredded up completely, their bodies unrecognizable as the things they once were. The Unggoy on the plasma cannon waited for the weapon to cool down, before dismantling it and stowing it on his back. He drew a plasma pistol and rejoined Thel.

'Gelamee jumped down, clutching his still steaming beam rifle, his face impassive. Thel searched the mass of bodies, searching for survivors. He only found one, whimpering as it clutched the stump of its arm, which had been shot off at the elbow. Thel lowered his plasma rifle and fired a bolt directly into the Unggoy's head, vaporizing it and killing the Unggoy. He then turned to the Special Operations team,

"Good work, brothers, but this is only the beginning." Thel rumbled, "We have no way of knowing how many more of these heretics are befoiling this place. We will root them all out, and bring them to

justice. Are we agreed?"

The rest of the team raised their fists to their chests and shouted in acknowledgment. Thel turned and signaled for the rest of the team to follow. They proceeded to the end of the room and down a ramp, staying alert at all times.

At the bottom Thel heard snuffling and the groan of an incoming elevator so he held back and signaled for his team to engage active camouflage. He moved behind a pillar, and surely enough several heretic Unggoy moved around the corner, warily sweeping the area in front of them with Needlers. Their Sangheili commander stood behind them, aiming his carbine down the corridor Thel lurked in.

As the heretics approached his hiding place Thel activated his own camouflage. The Unggoy moved past him, but the Sangheili lingered for a moment, and moved up to the pillar. As his carbine protruded, Thel grabbed it and gave it a swift tug, dragging its owner into view. Before the surprised Sangheili could react, Thel had brought his plasma rifle crashing down on the heretics head, smashing his skull. The Sangheili fell to the floor heavily. Meanwhile the heretic Unggoy had been taken by surprise and quickly cut down by Thel's troops. Thel ordered his team forward. They came upon an elevator leading further into the facility, and Thel signaled his team to take position inside it. Once everyone was in Thel hit a holographic symbol on the wall and the elevator slowly, silently took them deeper into the heretic's base.

* * *

><p>Sesa 'Refumee heard the sounds of weapon fire behind him, and he made haste into the next corridor. As he had suspected, his broadcasts had drawn the Covenant's attention on, and a strike team had been sent to the mine to silence him.</p>

'Refumee was determined not to let this happen, as the truth about the Halo rings had to be made known to everyone. Indeed, he had not expected a Covenant assault so soon. His forces had been caught off guard and the Covenant was cutting through them without breaking stride.

He had received reports that the attackers were Special Operations, which didn't surprise him but the thing that had caught him off-guard was the fact that they appeared to be led by an Arbiter. The ceremonious armor was easily identifiable. 'Refumee wondered if his uprising was the cause of this Arbiters creation. Perhaps he was a bigger threat to the Covenant than he had previously thought.

He had sounded a full scale alert, and all of his followers throughout the station were readying themselves to meet the attackers.

'Refumee had to keep distance between himself and his pursuers, and he was intending to locate a Banshee fighter and travel to another wing of the station. This was the labs where the vile Flood parasite was being kept contained. If the situation became desperate, 'Refumee would release the Flood to halt the Covenant assault.

'I am willing to do anything in order to preserve the truth' mused 'Refumee.

He hoped to get to the Banshee docks before any substantial Covenant air power came within the vicinity of the station. 'Refumee's own air force was ready to defend against such threats, however. He had multiple squadrons of Banshee fighters on station.

While they may not be able to best a large armada of heavily armed ships, such as Seraph fighters, they would be able to hold off a smaller amount with their sheer numbers. Armed with a pair of rapid fire Plasma Cannons and a Type 2 Fuel Rod Cannon, they were formidable weapons of war if utilized correctly by a skilled pilot.

'Refumee watched as a group of his loyalists lurked in the shadows, weapons ready to unleash a barrage into any attackers who went by. Confident that ambushes of this type would wear down the invaders and leave them more vulnerable, 'Refumee moved on through the maze of corridors, anticipating his next meeting with the Oracle.

* * *

><p>Thel warily checked his plasma rifle's charge. Just over a quarter remained. He glanced at Officer Dru 'Gelamee, who looked back at him with a haunted look in his eye. During their descent into the heretic's lair, they had killed countless of the non-believers, but at the price of both Unggoy and Trooper Ika 'Naskaree.</p>

'Naskaree had been the point man of the team and as they had turned a corner, the heretics, who had by then been well aware of the intruder's presence, had laid a trap. 'Naskaree had been opened fire upon by several Needlers, and as those weapons had exploding projectiles, he had been blown apart by the ensuing explosion. The heretics were fighting like cowards, staging ambushes from dark corners and side passages.

The warrior had died dishonorably, killed before even being able to retaliate. Thel had made sure that the guilty was punished, though. But the question remained: How much further did they have to go to capture the heretic leader?

Thel moved through another door and was suddenly struck by a searing beam of energy. An Aggressor Sentinel hovered above and in front of him, rapidly draining his energy shield with its beam weapon. The mechanical drones were, for some reason hostile to the Covenant team, and were in fact aiding the heretics, so Thel had no choice but to destroy them.

Thel ducked into the previous corridor as 'Gelamee fired a shot from his beam rifle at close range, impacting the Sentinel in its lower surface. It exploded in a vibrant burst of energy which blinded the sniper and lowered his shield.

'Gelamee turned, and came under fire from above. Two heretic Sangheili had appeared and peppered 'Gelamee with their carbines. 'Gelamee fell as Thel roared in fury and threw a plasma grenade with all his might. It flew straight onto one of their attacker's arms. The stuck Sangheili roared with surprise, dropping his carbine and pulling at the explosive attached to his arm. This was one of the Covenant explosive's useful properties. A moment later it exploded in a bright blue flash. The Sangheili was blown apart and his comrade

was thrown off the platform. Even before he hit the ground Thel was upon him, his energy sword flashing.

"Die, you traitorous dog!" he roared, spearing the downed heretic straight through the neck before he could rise. Purple blood sprayed as Thel flicked his wrist, decapitating the Sangheili. His blood spurted across the floor and his head rolled away, severed cleanly from the body.

Thel went over to 'Gelamee, who was still alive by some miracle. He had been hit four times. The first shot had knocked his shoulder armor plate off, but otherwise had not caused any harm. The second and third shots had both penetrated the Sangheili's gut. Carbine rounds were radioactive, and Thel was sure his internal organs had been baked in radiation. His purple blood trickled from the wounds, and Thel could understand the pain his comrade must feel. The fourth round had taken a chunk out of his left knee, rendering that limb unusable.

Thel understood that for a Sangheili, losing one's lifeblood was a great source of shame. 'Gelamee was shaking with fury. As long as he was still mobile, he would take down as many foes as he could before expiration. Thel felt that he did not have long anyway, and the Sangheili was determined to punish many more heretics before they could take his life.

With an angry roar, 'Gelamee pushed himself to his feet and retrieved his beam rifle from the floor with a shaking hand. He steadied himself against the wall and faced Thel.

"So, Arbiter. It seems that I have failed you." The Sangheili inhaled sharply. Blood was still trickling out of the neat holes punched in his abdomen, but his gaze met Thel's unflinchingly.

"No brother, you have failed no-one." There was once a time Thel would have regarded this as a severe loss of honor, but he no longer necessarily felt this way. Since his humiliation in front of the masses of the Covenant, he had begun to sense that the Sangheili's honor code had perhaps been twisted slightly by the San 'Shyuum.

Dru 'Gelamee had fought bravely at Thel's side, and had killed a significant portion of the non-believers that they had encountered. He had defended Thel, who could well have ended up being the one perforated with Carbine rounds. As far as Thel was concerned, 'Gelamee was a more-than-worthy comrade who was undeserving of this fate.

"Please, Arbiter. The error was mine; I was too hasty in shooting that Sentinel when it was so close to me. It was foreseeable, and could have been avoided. I shall bear this weight, and I will continue my fight alongside you for as long as I last." 'Gelamee, with obvious difficulty, brought his Beam Rifle to bear and sighted the next corridor.

Thel knew that there would be no point of arguing. If he was in 'Gelamee's position, he would be similarly determined. He moved forward, plasma rifle scanning the shadows.

Sesa 'Refumee stood in front of the massive windows that showed the exterior of the station, and the ever-nearing maelstrom. He knew

where he was going. He was going to unleash the Flood in the labs in the opposite arm of the station if his ambush somehow failed. If the attackers would not be stopped, then this was his last measure.

Before he left, however, he wished to have a look at this 'Arbiter' that was coming for him. He was judging whether this Sangheili would have what it took to stop him. He checked that his team was in position; five loyal Sangheili waited in the shadows, four with carbines and one wielding a heavier weapon: the feared fuel rod gun. The attackers were getting close, and 'Refumee' was determined that this was where they would meet their end.

This Arbiter would not break through. He raised his dual plasma rifles and levelled them at the only door into the room

The Arbiter sensed that the heretic was very close now. They had broken through another line of increasingly desperate heretics. Resistance was waning now; it was now mainly a clean-up job. 'Gelamee' had consistently proved his worth, despite his worsening condition. He had lost a lot of blood, and his strength was truly sapped. He still wished to take the lead, and nothing Thel could say would change his mind.

Thel nodded to 'Gelamee', who inhaled deeply and charged through the next door. The whining sound of multiple plasma rifles firing roared through the corridor. Thel heard 'Gelamee' roar in pain, but only seconds later he was quiet. The smell of burnt Sangheili flesh met Thel's nostrils and he recoiled.

Not intending to suffer the same fate as 'Gelamee', Thel crept slowly up to the door. He tried to peer around but came under fire immediately. Boiling plasma hit the wall near the door, sending fragments of heated metal everywhere and several bolts flew past his head. He quickly withdrew, but it was then he heard the voice.

"Come, Arbiter. Let us see what you are made of. Surely you will put up a more worthy fight than your comrade!"

That was Sesa 'Refumee'. Thel knew the voice as it had been one he had known for the vast majority of his life. He sounded very much the same as he had done when they had last spoke, aboard the _Seeker of Truth. _Thel pondered what to say, but instead of threatening his former comrade he tried something different,

"Please, brother. Do you really wish to kill me?"

At this, there was silence, and Thel judged it necessary to show himself. Slowly he rounded the doorframe. The first thing he noticed was the body of Dru 'Gelamee', lying on its back near the door. His chest and stomach had been completely burned away, and his corpse was blackened. Charred bone was visible in the Sangheili's tattered chest. His eyes were wide open and seemed to be staring intently at Thel.

When Thel looked up, it was into the face of a friend he knew very well.

* * *

><p>Sesa 'Refumee was stopped dead by the voice on the other side of the door. It couldn't be!

When the Sangheili rounded the corner, adorned in the ancient Arbiter armor, he couldn't immediately discern who it was, but when the Sangheili looked up into 'Refumee's eyes, he felt slightly weak.

"Thel?" he said quietly.

"It is indeed me, brother" said the voice he knew so well.

"How!" Said 'Refumee, aware that his voice was cracking.

Your soldiers are inept fighters, brother. They were only able to inflict casualties when they were able to ambush us with greater numbers. I am, however intrigued at how you managed to muster such a number of willing followers. I trust that you will be able to answer me this."

'Refumee was slightly unnerved by this. He answered in a neutral tone, however.

"The truth is indeed a powerful thing, far more so than any lies that can be fabricated to try and cover it.

"Once our eyes are open to the truth, we would of course hasten to grant others that knowledge. The truth I speak of is made more important as it has been spoken by a messenger of the Forerunner."

"What 'truth' do you speak of?" Questioned Thel.

"Why, _the _truth" replied 'Refumee. "The truth about the Great Journey, about the Covenant.

"When I landed on this mine with my team, we did so with the task of locating artifacts of value to the Covenant, as had been ordered by the Prophet of Stewardship.

Upon further investigation of the facility, we located a Forerunner Oracle, perhaps one of the last remaining messengers of the Forerunners. It claimed to be the monitor of the nearby Halo Ring, which of course has been destroyed by the Demon only recently.

When we questioned the Oracle about the Sacred Ring, what we were told was most unsettling to hear by a member of the Covenant.

"Brother, there is no 'Great Journey.' It is a lie fabricated by the Prophets who believe that they will achieve godhood. These rings are not our destiny. They are weapons, built by the Forerunner to starve the Flood parasite, by means of eliminating all lifeforms of sufficient biomass to be used as a food source for the Flood.

If the Prophets activate the rings, all they will achieve is the destruction of every organism in this universe.

"I have broadcast on any military channels that I could. Mainly

passing patrols were coming to the station. Those who were willing to hear the truth came to the mine for refuge. Once they came to hear the Oracles words for themselves, they, much like began to understand how they had been used by the Prophets.

In time, I have amassed a large number of followers. And already, most lie dead by your hand. Why? They merely had their eyes opened. Their deaths were not necessary.

"Please, Thel. Heed my words. There is no Great Journey. Trust the true messengers and not these false prophets. Do you see? The Covenant is leading itself on a path of self-destruction. There is no Journey. It is a lie!"

Even as 'Refumee finished talking, he noticed that Thel had raised his plasma rifle and had it pointed at him. He gasped inwardly; surely he wouldn't still kill him after hearing the truth.

"Brother, I am sorry. I have been sent here by the High Prophets with the mission of eliminating the heretic who is spreading propaganda meant to destabilize the Covenant. I cannot and will not believe this tale.

As much as it pains me, the heretic is you, Sesa. I am sorry. We have been through so much together. I do not want to do this, brother. But I have no choice. It is the Prophet's will."

"No, you do have a choice, Thel. The Prophets are manipulating you. They are sowing the seeds for our destruction. Do not think that they regard us as anything more than pawns. You have a choice. You can stand with us, and together we will be able to bring about the destruction of the false Covenant."

To this, Thel laughed. "Brother, I have yet to meet this 'Oracle' that has filled your head with this nonsense; The Covenant has been in formation eons longer than either of us has been alive. What you speak of goes against all of our teachings. The Covenants history is cemented in the holy texts. One Sangheili's word cannot compare. This is indeed a tale, and I, the Arbiter of the Covenant, am no heretic.

I have been accused of being one after the Sacred Ring fell, and I am determined to deny the Covenant any further reason to continue doing so. For as long as I live, I will do all that is in my power to uphold the Covenant, and will not allow anything try to sway me. You were my friend, Sesa, but now I am afraid that you are my enemy. I am truly sorry."

Sesa 'Refumee straightened up. "No, you are not. I would have thought that you would have more sense than this, after everything we have done together, everything I have told you. Know that I do speak the truth, and your Covenant shall find this out very soon." He turned,

"Kill him!"

* * *

><p>Thel 'Vadamee, Arbiter of the Covenant leapt into cover behind a nearby pillar as a deadly crossfire of carbine shots crisscrossed the

room, leaving brilliant green contrails in the air. The pillar Thel stood behind began to crumble from the weapons fire. Thel heard the familiar sound of a fuel rod gun firing, and rolled away from the column.<p>

A moment later, a massive explosion shook the room. The pillar Thel had just vacated exploded in a mist of irradiated metal shards. As Thel came out of his roll, he saw at least four Sangheili were moving slowly into the room, taking cover and firing potshots at him. He fired a stream of plasma at one of them, but the wily Sangheili evaded into cover, leaving the shots to splash harmlessly on the wall behind him.

Thel moved behind cover himself and once he was hidden from view he checked his plasma rifle's charge. The gun was almost drained. He certainly wouldn't be able to take out all of the present Sangheili. He looked back at 'Gelamee's body. The Sangheili's beam rifle was lying a short distance away. Thel used the last of his plasma rifles shots to keep his foes behind cover before discarding the weapon and diving for the beam rifle.

Thel grabbed the rifle just before coming under fire again but he made it back to cover. The rifle had four shots left, so they had to count. Thel did not have much time â€“ the maelstrom was closing in and soon the whole station would be engulfed so he needed to act quickly. He threw a grenade towards his foes and relocated to another pillar.

The thump of another fuel rod blast shook Thel to the bone. The heavy weapon operator was Thel's priority target, as he posed the largest threat. Thankfully, the Sangheili was not behind cover, undoubtedly confident of his Fuel Rod Gun's dominance in combat. He was scanning the area for Thel but he never found him as a brilliant beam of purpled light flashed through his head. The Sangheili fell, his finger squeezing the trigger. The fuel rod slammed straight into one of his comrades, completely disintegrating him and knocking two nearby Sangheili off their feet. Thel tracked one to the ground and as he hit, another Beam Rifle shot brained him. The other downed Sangheili suffered the same fate a moment later. The last Sangheili roared, an energy sword flashing to life in his hands. He made a beeline for Thel.

Thel was ready, however. The Sangheili lunged at Thel, who dodged to the side. The Sangheili stumbled, not expecting the maneuver and Thel lashed out with his boot, connecting with the Sangheili's sword hand. The blow shattered the Sangheili's hand and he dropped the sword which upon impact with the ground, dissipated.

The Sangheili lashed out with the other hand, connecting with Thel's helmet, but the underpowered blow did not faze him. In the corner of his eye, Thel could see Sesa 'Refumee taking to the air with his thruster pack. Thel smacked the Sangheili with the beam rifle, stunning him, and then quickly grabbed him as the heretic leader opened fire. Thel spun the dazed Sangheili in front of him, holding him as a shield.

The heretic leader's plasma fire burned through the Sangheili, missing Thel. He grabbed the plasma pistol on the dead heretic's thigh plate, activated it and held the trigger down, building up an overcharged bolt.

* * *

><p>Sesa 'Refumee realized what was happening a moment too late, as the overcharged bolt of plasma sent him flying backwards and onto the floor, his shield completely depleted and his thruster pack's power temporarily cut. He shouted in surprise, picking himself up of the floor as regular plasma pistol bolts impacted around him.</p>

'Refumee panicked, making a dash for the door leading to the stations exterior. He kept 'Vadamee pinned down with his plasma rifles before bolting down the corridor. Two final loyal Sangheili had landed and were readying their weapons on the exterior platform. 'Refumee ran up to them.

"Deal with the Arbiter, brothers. I will protect the Oracle. Its truth must not be silenced. He knew his comrades were likely going to die, but if 'Vadamee could be held back long enough than 'Refumee could carry out his final desperate action to halt him. He climbed into a nearby Banshee, its interior conforming to his physique, and activated it, before boosting off the platform towards the laboratories in the opposite wing of the station.

The winds were picking up, and 'Refumee could see the massive swirling maelstrom below the station. Within another two or three units the station would be swallowed by the storm. In this way, the Flood parasite would be destroyed, so even if they were released now it wouldn't matter.

'Refumee checked that his air force was present in the surrounding atmosphere, and then set down near the entryway leading to the laboratories. The guards moved aside and he entered.

Moving through the corridors quickly, he leapt down into the first lab, ordered his subordinates to release the containment locks keeping the flood dormant. They did not question him. The chambers in the walls exploded and hundreds of small bulbous creatures poured forth from the green depths. Held aloft by clusters of small tentacles, they scurried towards 'Refumee and his team. They stood stunned for a moment before the 'infection forms' were upon them.

Upon contact with personal energy shields, the little beasts exploded in a puff of spores. Each explosion caused some damage however, and the sheer numbers of them overwhelmed his team's shields. The forms latched onto the Sangheili and forced their razor-sharp penetrators through their necks. The Sangheili writhed in pain as the infection forms fought over them. One Sangheili turned and an infection form landed on his back, forcing its penetrator into him.

Blood sprayed as the hideous creatures wormed their way into their Sangheili hosts. Roars of pain echoed through the room as tumors and fleshy growths appeared across the Sangheili's bodies. 'Refumee watched as a cluster of tentacles snapped out from the Sangheili's left wrist, breaking the hand and then a sickening snap as the infection form's sensory stalks appeared, breaking the Sangheili's neck.

'Refumee quickly backed away, his dual plasma rifle's screaming,

tearing through his former comrade. He quickly killed the other Sangheili, who were by now warped into similar monstrosities. He backed into the open door nearby and hit the lock. The door slammed shut, separating him from the carnage in the other room. 'Refumee knew that the Flood would now likely spread through the rest of the station, so he had to move quickly.

* * *

><p>Even as the heretic leader ran out through the door, Thel was already grabbing another weapon, a discarded carbine and searching for spare ammunition. He found some and he turned to see his quarry on the other side of the large windows, conversing with two more Sangheili before taking off in a Banshee. The heretic Sangheili moved into the adjoining corridor.</p>

Thel was ready. As the first one rounded the corner, Thel stuck a plasma grenade point blank to his chest and kicked him back down the corridor. A flash of blue light and a spray of blood and Thel was on the platform. Feeling the winds picking up, he wasted no time in taking the other Banshee.

Thel had flown the fighters many times before; the heretics had desecrated the Covenant design, stripping off its purple paint in some places, leaving the golden framework exposed. Thel felt disgusted that he was to operate such a heretical machine, but there was no other choice. At that moment Commander Rtas 'Vadumee's voice crackled in Thel's communications device.

"The Heretics are mobilizing their air forces, Arbiter. Get after their leader, but watch your back. I'm sending one of our Phantoms to support you." The winds outside the station were gaining strength, and the relatively small Banshee was proving slightly difficult to handle. Thel looked through his viewfinders, and saw the bulky figure of the Phantom dropship coming into sight. Its trio of Heavy Plasma Turrets roared into action, sending multiple bolts of large, red superheated plasma across the sky and into a heretic Banshee. The plasma burned through the Banshee's light armor, setting the engine on fire and killing its operator. The Banshee exploded in a vibrant explosion, but there was many more coming in, and Thel knew it was going to be a long and arduous search for the heretic leader.

* * *

><p>Thel set his Banshee down roughly on the platform. The Banshee's left canard had been destroyed, and its fuel rod cannon was out of action. The main armor plate still smoldered from several plasma blasts. The search had not been easy: Over thirty heretic Banshees had been neutralized, along with more mounted Shade turrets and fuel rod emplacements. The support Phantom had taken a beating, but had survived and was in the process of dropping off another Special Operations team, along with Commander Rtas Vadumee himself to support Thel as he proceeded deeper into the station.</p>

They had had little success in locating the heretic leader, but they had eventually tracked him to this part of the station: one of the long supporting 'arms' of the structure. The heretic had fled further into the station and with the winds of the brewing maelstrom beneath the station gaining strength, was seemingly willing to die for his cause. Still, this was Thel's fate, to die for the glory of the

Covenant in redemption for his sins. Thel was going to prove his worth, even in death. He greeted 'Vadamee by the door, beckoned the Unggoy to move in first, and then moved steadily in, deeper into the station.

**A/N: Another chapter. As I'm sure you have noticed, this is not a carbon copy of the events of Halo 2's****'Arbiter' level, as that may be boring to some. I have tried to add new interactions and new scenarios to spice up the story. I am trying to convey a (somewhat) emotional underpinning to the relationships to the character, in order to flesh them out and make them easier to sympathize with, as opposed to the (somewhat) blank slates they are in the games, all respect due. I said 'somewhat' twice in that paragraph :P**_

4. Chapter 4 - A Horror Unleashed

Disclaimer â€“ I own nothing Halo. That's 343 Industries.
Soooâ€!

The Arbiter's Tale

Chapter 4

A Horror Unleashed

Rtas 'Vadumee stopped and inhaled deeply. Thel, standing behind him, turned, "What is it?"

"That stenchâ€! I've smelled it before." Replied 'Vadumee. It was at that moment that the smell hit Thel, a putrid, gangrenous smell. It lingered in the air, filling Thel's lungs with its tang. The team moved cautiously into the next room.

The first thing that caught Thel's eye was a large, transparent tank that was situated in the centre of the room. The glass was slightly misted, but Thel could discern movement from within. Upon closer examination, it appeared that there were about a dozen small, rounded creatures floating around in the clear liquid. Thel had no idea what they were and how they had come to be here. The glass they were in was very thick, and it didn't appear as if the creatures were of any threat.

Thel passed the tank and saw that there was some form of sickly, putrescent slime flecked on the walls. It had a dull green/brown coloration, and it was surely the source of the stench that was in the air. Thel didn't know exactly what the slime was, but he had a slight suspicionâ€!

The heretics were certainly responsible for all this, and Thel made a mental note to question 'Refumee on this when he caught him, if he did catch him. Thel noticed that 'Vadumee was looking rather more wary than normal, due to the way he scanned every corner, and how his gaze kept returning to the fluid on the walls. The Unggoy too were making nervous noises and shivering, but the Unggoy were notoriously cowardly anyway, so Thel took little notice.

The sound of plasma fire met Thel's ears, and the team hurried into entered a wider corridor with a glass floor. The noise was coming from below, but the glass was so fogged up all the team could see was

the silhouettes of the combatants and the illumination of plasma fire. It appeared as though the fighters were all Sangheili, but then Thel noticed that something was wrong.

Most of the combatants seemed to be moving erratically, and they attacked with reckless abandon, throwing themselves about the chamber. The noises that met Thel's ears were those of no Sangheili. A chorus of unworldly screeches emanated through the corridor, putting Thel on edge. Eventually the noise died down, and Thel could hear the victorious creature's footfalls as they moved off. For a few moments no-one spoke, but then one of the Sangheili, Trooper Neru 'Sanaree whispered,

"By the Rings, what is that?"

The Unggoy began to whimper and mumble. The noise always annoyed Thel. The creatures were craven cowards, and the scared noises that they made always gave Thel the urge to break their necks.

Before Thel could reprimand them, 'Sanaree growled dangerously, quieting the Unggoy. The corridor led into a wider room. This room was clearly some form of laboratory or storage chamber, judging by the green-hued pods on the walls.

Whatever had been contained here had obviously broken quarantine, as evidenced by the fact that they had been broken, and were empty. The ceiling had glass pipes running across it, which appeared to be designed for transporting cargo containers.

Thel's team stood on the upper level of the room, and they would have to jump down to reach the lower one. The Sangheili had no with this, due to their strong legs and lean, athletic bodies, but for the short and stocky Unggoy, it was a great deal more difficult, but they managed it.

There were several corpses scattered around the room. Thel went over to one of the corpses and examined it. It was, or _had once _been Sangheili. The flesh was discolored a pale yellow, and appeared to be decomposing. The Sangheili's neck was clearly broken, and the reason was plain to see: there was a gaping hole where the base of the neck was meant to be. It appeared as though something had buried into the Sangheili. It had been felled by plasma fire, as indicated by several charred holes in its flesh

The other bodies littered around the chamber possessed similar characteristics. Thel was not _scared, _he was Sangheili; but this turn of events was certainly unsettling him. Wondering what had happened to these Sangheili and what the heretics had done was playing on his mind, and Thel was determined to get answers from the heretic leader.

A swooping noise caught Thel's attention. He readied his Carbine, and the rest of the team followed suit. He looked around, and spotted a small, blue orb descending from a vent in the roof of the room. It was giving off a faint blue glow, and when it came to level with Thel, it made a popping noise, there was a flash of light, and Thel found himself face-to-face with Sesa 'Refumee, the heretic leader.

Before Thel could open his mouth, the Unggoy gave a shrill bark, and opened fire with their Plasma Pistols. Plasma splashed across the

heretic's body, but with each shot he merely flashed, oddly out of focus. Thel knew that this was a holodrone, a holographic representation of the real heretic leader. Rtas Vadumee shouted for the Unggoy to hold their fire, and as soon as they had stopped, the heretic turned to face Thel,

"I wandered who the prophets would send to silence me. Thel 'Vadamee, or should I say, the 'Arbiter?' I am truly flattered."

"He's using a holodrone, he must be close" Rtas said to his team, and then, turning to face the holodrone, "come out so that we may kill you."

To this, the heretic simply chuckled,

"Get in line."

Before anything more could be said, there was another pop and flash, and the holodrone, once again a shimmering blue orb, fell to the ground. There was a moment of silence, and then Thel heard a skittering, crawling sound.

He watched as a dozen small, bulbous creatures dropped into the room. They were vaguely spherical in shape, with a sagging brown lobe near the top and three elongated appendages tipped with razor-sharp penetrators held in front of them, anticipating the air. The creatures were held aloft by a mass of tentacles, and they moved with surprising speed towards the Special Operations team. 'Vadumee shouted,

"Stand fast, the Flood is upon us!" He scythed his Energy Sword through several of the creatures, which exploded in a puff of noxious mist and spores. As Thel brought his own weapon to bear, he watched as one of the beasts made its way over to one of the Sangheili corpses. It squeezed its way into the open wound, and in a split second, the body began to convulse, and in one fluid movement, leapt onto its feet.

Thel heard the bones in its leg break, but the reanimated Sangheili took no notice, it simply made a beeline for 'Vadumee, its left arm exploding into a monstrous collection of tentacles.

'Vadamee speared the incoming creature with his sword, destroying the latent parasite. Thel's Carbine flashed, burning more of the small creatures. The rest of the team opened fire, but still more of the 'infection forms' rained down on them.

The small creatures were extremely frail, popping like balloons when hit by weapons fire, and those that attempted to latch onto the Sangheili simply disintegrated on their energy shield. However the creatures were very numerous, and they easily overwhelmed the two Unggoy in Thel's team, who went down seconds into the fight. Still more infection forms were making their way to the bodies on the ground. The Sangheili were quick to put these 'combat forms; down as their tenticled limbs were sure to be lethal if used in close combat.

The war raged on for several more minutes, although it felt longer to Thel. It seemed as though the minuscule creatures would overcome the Sangheili with their sheer numbers. Eventually a nearby door cycled

open. Upon noticing this, 'Vadumee called over to Thel.

"Go Arbiter!" He crushed another infection form under his foot. "I'll follow when our reinforcements arrive!"

Thel did not wish to leave the commander alone with the Flood, but he was in command, and it wouldn't do to answer back, so he nodded and headed into the next corridor, the two Special Operation Sangheili following. The next door opened to a large circular room, which appeared to be a cargo holder and transporter, as indicated by the various cylinders sitting in recesses in the walls and on the platform.

A battle was already underway between more combat forms and several Aggressor Sentinels. The Sentinels weapons seemed to be effective at burning through the Flood's rotting flesh, but the combat forms wielded weapons of their own, primarily Carbines. This factor, as well as the Flood's numbers meant that the few Sentinels were destroyed after a few minutes; leaving several Flood forms still standing.

The three Sangheili burned the combat forms down before the latter could close the distance. Moving forward, Thel was surprised by a loud groaning sound and the floor beneath his feet shifting as the room rotated and began a slow descent into the depths of the facility. The platform they were on had a raised section as well as mechanical arms that moved containers on and off the platform.

The journey down was not a pleasant one, as the platform moved excruciatingly slow and it periodically stopped to allow Flood combat forms to leap aboard from various gaps and spaces in the walls. These were combatted preferably at range, as their tenticled arms were lethal up close. More than once Thel had been blindsided by a combat form, and only quick thinking had saved him from almost certain death.

Thankfully for the Covenant team, When a Flood infection form infected a corpse; it weakened its overall durability. This was certainly a result of the rapid mutations that took place. As a result, their rotted bodies were easily burned by weaponry. Although the host body did not register pain, the controlling infection form was highly susceptible to damage and if it was destroyed then the body would be incapacitated. The body would still need to be destroyed to prevent reanimation, however.

Occasionally, a group of Sentinels would descend, attacking both Thel's party and the Flood. They were weak however and easily taken down. The primary danger was destroyed Sentinels crashing down on the heads of the ground-based combatants. Additionally, the containers on the platform held infection forms, which burst free if the containers were damaged.

After a hellish journey, the platform finally ground to a stop and Thel and his weary comrades made their way into a corridor lit up by artificial lighting. The corpses of several heretics lay sprawled at various points. Trooper Neru 'Sanaree regarded them,

"We should have brought weapons to burn these bodies." He said, nudging a downed Sangheili with his foot. "Every one is a vessel for the Flood."

Thel agreed with his assessment. The Flood was capable of infesting almost every sentient being of sufficient size. The team hadn't brought appropriate weapons with them and there simply wasn't time to destroy the bodies. The Flood would be destroyed in the stations collapse, anyway.

The team emerged onto the upper gallery of a large rectangular room. It seemed to be another lab. Thel could just make out another battle occurring on the ground floor from the misted glass lining the 'observation room.'

It was then that Thel spotted a _new _Flood form. It was a large bloated creature that stumbled around on stunted legs and when perforated by any weapons fire, would swell up and explode, throwing infection forms everywhere.

Within a few minutes, the sounds of battle died down. Thel kicked the glass, smashing it easily with his armored foot. The noise attracted the combat forms in the room, causing them to _leap _into the air towards the Special Operations team. One of the twisted bodies landed in front of Thel who ducked under its flailing arms and shot the infection form in its chest. The small creature exploded, causing the combat form to fall back into the room truly dead.

Another one crashed through another gallery window, followed by another. The team concentrated their fire, bringing down the onrushing combat forms. The team would have to descend to the lower level of the lab to continue, as there was only one other door on their current level, and this was locked.

Thel jumped first, crushing several infection forms beneath his feet. His two Sangheili followed after him. There were many infection forms still present in the room, and Thel could see one of them in the process of transforming a heretic Sangheili into a combat form. Thel quickly destroyed it to prevent further trouble.

Thel heard movement above and turned, coming under fire from a Covenant Carbine. Two more heretic Sangheili had appeared on the upper level of the room and were proceeding to attack the Special Operations Team.

Thel darted behind a nearby crate, returning fire with his own weapon. The heretics had the higher ground and likely have succeeded in ousting Thel and his team if not from the intervention of many Flood forms attacking them from behind.

One heretic was beaten down while the other was flung off the platform before landing with a sickening crash on the ground near Thel. The heretics neutralized, the Flood turned their attention to the Sangheili below.

Infection forms poured down from the gallery, before getting burned by the Sangheili's weaponry. Combat forms took longer to kill, their ravaged beings unfeeling of pain and only stopping when they were damaged beyond use or the infection form had been killed.

So on it went, the Flood now pouring down from both upper galleries now, dividing the Sangheili fire. Thel realized that they would be overwhelmed if they stayed here so he shouted for his team to retreat

to the opposite end of the room, where there was a pair of Plasma Cannons set up in flanking positions to a locked door.

Thel moved with his team to the strongpoint. He sat behind one Plasma Cannon while 'Sanaree took the other. The other Sangheili stood behind them, firing his Carbine across the room to hit incoming Flood forms.

The combat forms, despite their unnatural pain resistance, couldn't stand up to the two streams of searing plasma that was now tearing through them. The infection forms were plentiful, but were easily destroyed as they attempted to revive fallen corpses.

After several minutes of sustained combat, the tide of Flood started to stem, and Thel heard the door open behind him. A scared heretic Unggoy came running out of the room and upon noticing Thel and his team, tried to run back in but Thel, being a Sangheili and much more agile and quicker than the Unggoy, had already jumped down and slammed his fist into the back of the Unggoy's head with enough force to send a mix of blood and methane from his shattered mask onto the wall.

Thel ordered his team into the elevator. The door closed suddenly, almost crushing 'Sanaree, the last to enter. The elevator silently descended and Thel wondered how much longer they had before the maelstrom struck the facility, likely just one more unit at the very most. They would need to make haste.

The door opened and Thel stepped out onto a long walkway. He could feel the strong winds brushing against him. He could see plasma bolts and ricocheting needles firing ahead of him indicating a battle being fought somewhere ahead.

Thel's communications unit crackled in his ear. "Bring the Phantoms closer to the mine." The Special Operations Commander said, steel in his voice. "We are not leaving until the leader of these heretics is dead."

As they moved into cover Thel heard the soft thrum of a Phantom dropship's engines and surely enough one of the ships descended towards the walkway, bobbing in the wind. Its trio of plasma cannons roared into action, firing downrange at the combatants.

Satisfied that there was no return fire aimed at the Phantom, the dropship moved closer, hovering ahead of Thel. Its gravity lift came to life, allowing several Unggoy to descend, followed by Rtas 'Vadumee himself. 'Vadumee hailed Thel.

"Greetings once again, Arbiter. Let us go and slay this heretic now, before it is too late."

"Yes, brother. His time has come to an end."

Silently, the Special Operations team moved to the end of the walkway, past several dead heretics and Flood combat forms. At that point the path split in two. One fork took the left, the other the right. Reluctant to have any possible enemy attack his flank, Thel split the squad, taking 'Sanaree and one of the Unggoy up one branch while the Commander took the other Sangheili and Unggoy up the other. The walkway had many support pillars that served as great places for

potential ambushes. Thel and his team moved from cover to cover, not exposing themselves for any more than a moment.

Hearing a muffled grunt up ahead, Thel halted his team, before creeping forward towards one of the central pillars ahead. Pausing for a moment, Thel engaged his active camouflage and rounded the pillar. Surely enough, there was a heretic Unggoy crouched behind the pillar, his Needler raised. The small creature had no idea that Thel was there, and squealed when Thel materialized behind him, grabbed hold of his harness, and threw him over the edge of the platform.

If the unfortunate Unggoy screamed all the way down, Thel couldn't tell as the winds of the maelstrom were now picking up. Thel and his team pushed their way up the ramps, the wind whipping against them. They faced no further resistance until near the top, when a trio of Sentinels wobbled into sight, tilting in the wind. The Special Operations team shot the Sentinels down as the latter struggled to focus their weapons on them. Reaching the apex of the structure, Thel's team charged inside, passing through several doors before emerging into a large, multi-tiered room. Thel spotted the heretic leader running for a door at the opposite side of the room.

Roaring, Thel fired his Carbine after the heretic leader, but he had already passed through the door and had erected an energy barrier, on which Thel's shots dissipated harmlessly on. There were several more Sentinels in the room, as well as several combat forms, and a vicious three-way melee developed. Eventually emerging victorious, with only the loss of one of the Unggoy, Thel approached the energy-protected door where the heretic leader was preparing to leave.

Sesa 'Refumee turned to look at Thel. "This will save me from the storm, but you will be consumed."

Anger boiled up inside Thel, and he pounded the barrier, but the door had already closed. Hearing movement behind him, Thel turned to face the Special Operations Commander.

"Arbiter, where is he?" 'Vadumee asked but Thel had already moved past him and was studying a holographic representation of the facility. He could see the facilities support structures had been weakened by the storm, as was indicated by red flashing dots and lines. A plan was already forming in his head. It was suicidal and would certainly result in Thel's death, but that was what an Arbiter was supposed to do, bring glory in death for the rest of the Covenant.

Although he was going to die, the heretic leader was going to perish also. Thel was going to do this, to bring honor to his lineage, and he has to do it alone.

Behind him, he could hear the Special Operations Commander huff in frustration. "Stinking floodbait has boxed himself in tight; we will never break through this."

Still studying the hologram, Thel said,

"Then we shall force him out"

"How?" Rtas Vadumee said questioningly, turning and looking at the hologram as well.

"The cable" Thel said simply. "I'm going to cut it. Get everyone back to the Phantom. "

The Special Operations Commander did not reply to Thel, but instead turned to his troops,

"Warriors, return to the landing zone! The Arbiter will continue upwards, cut this station loose and scare the heretic from his hole."

'Gelamee bowed his head to Thel, "May our lords guide your hand, Arbiter"

The other Sangheili said to Thel. "We shall not forget your sacrifice."

"I bid you farewell." Thel said. Turning to 'Vadumee, he said.

"May the gods watch over your battles, brother. We will meet once again in the next life and walk the Path together."

"Yes, brother. We will" 'Vadumee said, before turning and following his soldiers back to the landing zone. Thel glanced once more at the holographic diagram of the facility and checked the charge on his Plasma Rifle. It was nearly out of energy. He was going to have to scavenge another weapon soon. Shrugging, Thel made his way up a nearby ramp which spiraled upwards, around a power conduit.

No sooner had Thel reached the top when a nearby door opened and several combat forms rushed in, followed by one of the bloated monstrosities Thel had seen earlier in the infested lab. The combat forms were relatively fast but the Flood 'carrier' was very slow moving, staggering on small stubby legs. The flood forms torso was grossly enlarged and swollen, and Thel could see it pulsing as the infection forms inside struggled for release. The creature held two slim, disfigured 'arms' in front of itself which twitched, likely guiding the carrier towards Thel.

Thel backpedalled, firing at the incoming combat forms. Aiming for the infection forms, Thel soon knocked them out. He turned his Carbine on the carrier form, sending several rounds into the bulbous creature. The carrier detonated with a boom, sending a dozen infection forms and feathery spores into the air. Thel then used his last shots on the infection forms to prevent them from resurrecting the combat forms before reloading his weapon. Satisfied that he had enough ammunition, Thel continued his ascent.

Eventually reaching a round platform that he assumed would take him to the upper level of the station, Thel activated the nearby panel. Surely enough, the platform began to ascend. The platform moved at a fairly fast rate, and this proved somewhat disorientating to Thel, but he kept his wits about him.

Thel glanced up, and saw the brewing storm far above through the thick transparent roof. More important to Thel was the crisscrossing Sentinel beams and plasma fire that passed over the destination of the platform. The platform began to slow as it neared the top and Thel activated his active camouflage as the platform eased to a stop. Thel quickly made for a secluded space beneath one of a series of

raised ramps that ran the sides of the triangular room. Thel received word from 'Vadumee that all of his troops were off-station, allowing him to cut the cables.

Ducking into cover, Thel chanced a look around. He could see several Sentinels floating around as they attempted to put down a multitude of combat forms that were running rampant throughout the room. Many of the combat forms wielded weapons, so the fight was fairly balanced.

With this chaos going on, none of the combatants noticed Thel as he unsheathed his energy blade, slipped over to the nearest of the three large support pylons in the corners of the room and sunk the sword straight into the pylon.

Covenant energy swords were unlike traditional Sangheili curveblades in that rather than being made of a conventional material, they were composed of pure superheated plasma. This was contained within a magnetic field that prevented it from leaking out and melting the ground beneath it.

As a result of the extraordinary high temperature of the weapon, it simply boiled away anything it came into contact with. This made it particularly devastating, as it could completely bypass armor and energy shielding.

Thel's sword was having no problem burning through the thick pylon. His sword easily melted the cable and a moment later, he had cut straight through it. With a resonating boom, the upper part of the cut pylon flew away from Thel, pulled up to the roof of the building. Thel heard the groaning as more pressure was put on the remaining two pylons to keep the station from plummeting into the massive maelstrom below.

Unfortunately, Thel's efforts attracted the attention of several nearby combat forms, who rushed him. Thel stood ready, and as the first one neared him he viciously slashed with his sword. The chest of the combat form, along with the parasite within was burned away. Even as it fell to the floor Thel had already dealt a similar blow to the second Flood form. Immediate threats neutralized, Thel turned his attention to the other pylons.

* * *

><p>Sesa 'Refumee stood behind the locked door that he had barricaded with an energy shield to prevent the Special Operations team from pursuing him further. His attempt to stop the Covenant by releasing the Flood had not gone the way he had wished. The parasite had quickly spread throughout the mine, killing and infecting most of his followers, while the Special Operations team had continued to press forward.<p>

No matter, the Covenant and the Flood would all perish here when the rapidly approaching super storm hit the station. By that time he would be far from this station. He had his own personal Seraph fighter in the hangar, and that would be his method of escape.

Suddenly, 'Refumee felt a massive jolt and the room began to shake violently, almost throwing him off his feet. A horrible revelation

came into his head.

'_The Covenant has cut the cable!'' _

The only thing that was keeping the mine stable in atmosphere was the pylons at the top of the facility. With these cut, the station would be falling uncontrollably into the maelstrom, and the deaths of all those within was assured. The room was thrown into darkness as the stations power went offline. The energy barrier 'Refumee had erected was also deactivated as a result.

With a new surge of fear, 'Refumee backpedalled onto the platform that would take him further down to a way out of the station where he prayed there was still a Banshee present to get him to the hangar.

* * *

><p>Upon arriving back in the multi-tiered room, Thel was immediately accosted by several Aggressor Sentinels which seemed to have been waiting for him. Thel was ready, however, and he quickly brought them down with careful shots from his Carbine.</p>

The room was significantly darker than when Thel had passed through before, and red emergency lights illuminated the joins between the walls and the floor. The ground shook as the Station continued to be jostled about by the super storm.

Descending the ramps, Thel caught sight of a fierce battle in progress between the Flood and several heretics who were fighting to prevent the parasite from entering through the now opened door that the heretic leader had since vacated. The heretics were clearly determined, but the Flood's sheer overwhelming numbers were proving too much for them.

Thel moved forward, dropping combat forms and shooting infection forms to prevent the resurrection of the combat forms. Through the door, he could see a Sangheili heretic with an Energy Sword slashing through the combat forms that surrounded him. Spotting Thel, the heretic made a beeline for him

"Our lives for the truth!" He shouted, "The truth and the Covenant!"

Thel opened fire with the Carbine, but he was only able to get a few shots off, which sparked off his shield, before the heretic was on him. Thel ducked below the Sangheili's initial sword swipe. He heard the crackling energy pass over his head. He brought his Carbine into his opponent's midsection, causing the heretic to double over. He was still able to lash out with his blade however. Thel dodged to the side, but the sword sheared his Carbine in half.

Roaring in fury, Thel struck out with his boot into the heretic's leg. His shields flared purple, and the heretic howled in pain at the sudden, powerful impact. Thel followed this up with a series of punches to the heretics face and a jab to the throat which dropped the Sangheili to the floor.

Thel brought his boot down on the Sangheili's sword hand, crushing it and forcing him to release the sword. Thel felt more tremors and realized that he would need to hasten to catch up to the heretic

leader. Leaving the battered Sangheili on the floor for the Flood infection forms that were closing in, Thel ran through the door, grabbing a Plasma Rifle off the floor and jabbed at a holographic panel which he assumed would bring the platform up to him, assuming it still functioned.

Ignoring the screams and the disgusting crunches of the heretic Sangheili being transformed by the Flood, Thel jumped onto the platform as soon as it was visible and hit the stud which made it descend once more.

Thel arrived in what he assumed was the main power generator for the mine. He could see the massive, slowly rotating conduit in the centre of the large room. He passed several bodies of heretics and Flood combat forms as he moved down the ramps that circled the generator. He could see a makeshift barrier consisting of storage crates around the door at the bottom, and several heretic Unggoy and Sangheili taking cover. One of the Sangheili shouted upon seeing Thel and the defenders opened fire.

Cursing, Thel moved behind a support strut and readied himself. He peered out and lobbed a Plasma Grenade at the barrier, following up with fire from his Plasma Rifle. The grenade blew the rudimentary defense apart and scattered the heretics. He burned down the Unggoy as they struggled to regain their composure and he drew his sword as he closed with the Sangheili.

Once Sangheili had his head cut clean off with the burning Energy Sword and the other suffered a slash to his stomach, causing his internal organs to spill out. The unfortunate Sangheili gurgled as he fell, clutching at his entrails. Thel mercifully finished him with another stab to the chest.

Hearing the distorted howls of the Flood, Thel turned and saw many of the parasitic forms making their way into the room through the way he had came. Thel darted through the door, suddenly feeling strong gusts of wind. This meant that he was almost back outdoors. Thel caught sight of the heretic leader leaving in a Banshee that had surprisingly not gotten dislodged by the stations freefall.

Thel fired an extended burst from his rifle after the heretic, but this only served to attract his attention. Thel ducked around the doorframe as plasma splashed the ground nearby. He peered out again as the heretic leader sped past, heading towards the hangar. Thel ran for the final Banshee on the platform before it was destroyed by the fierce conditions.

Ignoring the winds which jostled his flier about, and the pieces of the station which threaten to smash into him as he tried to navigate the confusing airspace, Thel recalled the location of the bay that was closest to the hangar; the one which he had used in his initial aerial pursuit of the heretic leader. He saw several other Banshee's trying to vacate the area, but Thel knew that their attempts to escape were in vain. Only a space-rated ship would be able to break free from this atmosphere. The only one present within the station was the Seraph fighter that was docked in the hangar, and that was the one which the heretic leader was heading for.

Thel eventually located the Banshee bay that lead back into the station, but the winds proved to be too much for him to make a

controlled landing. The Banshee plowed into the station just below the bay, but Thel was able to jump and grab the rim of the platform. He pulled himself up and quickly moved through the open access way. Crawling up the darkened access corridor, Thel emerged into a familiar area.

The room in which Thel had faced off against the heretic leader and a number of his underlings was now occupied by a number of Sangheili combat forms, which were in combat with some of the mines few surviving Sentinels. Activating his active camouflage, Thel slipped by and headed through the door that would take him up to the hangar, where he would confront his old friend Sesa 'Refumee for the last time.

* * *

><p>Thel broke the neck of the last surviving heretic Unggoy in the conveyor room, before retrieving his Plasma Rifle. The journey back through the station had not been pleasant, as the Flood had thoroughly spread throughout the station, and he was forced to fight his way through waves of the parasite as well as surviving heretics which were trying to fall back to cover their leader.</p>

Nevertheless, Thel had broken the last bastion of resistance in the room which seemed to be designed for transporting gas containers. These belts were all offline due to the stations lack of power, but this mattered little to Thel; the whole station would be pulled into the heart of the maelstrom within the next short unit.

Thel had just emerged into the hangar to catch sight of his old friend clambering onto the Seraph exoatmospheric fighter. He raised his Plasma Rifle.

"Turn, heretic!"

Sesa 'Refumee turned, looking back in surprise at Thel, whom he had assumed had perished at the hands of the Flood. "Arbiter." He said, leaping down from the Seraph to face Thel.

"I would rather die by your hand, than let the Prophets lead me to slaughter."

"Do not fear, for that will indeed come to pass." Thel grunted, meeting the heretic leader's eyes.

"I will admit that I did not think that I would be conversing with you once again, Arbiter." The Heretic said. "Maybe now you will be able to hear the truth about the Holy Rings yourself."

Before Thel could reply, a soft cheerful humming sound met his ears. Thel looked up, and he saw a glowing blue orb descending from one of the many vents that lined the ceiling. He was taken aback; he did not believe that he would live to see one of these messengers of the gods for himself.

"The Oracle" he gasped.

The Oracle floated down until he was eye level with Thel. He could see that it was made from burnished silver alloy, with an internal

eye, which gave off a radiant blue light. He would give off pulses of energy every few seconds. So this was the devise the Ancients had left behind to pass on their instruction to the lesser creatures of the universe.

"Hello!" The Oracle said by way of greeting. He spoke in a jolly, but nonetheless artificial voice. "I am 343 Guilty Spark. I am the Monitor of Installation 04."

Thel was about to speak when the heretic leader cut in. "Ask the Oracle about Halo, how they would sacrifice us all for nothing!" He growled, placing his clenched right hand over his chest.

"More questions? Splendid! I would be happy to assistâ€|" the Oracle started.

Thel, who was listening with rapt attention, was caught off-guard when plasma splashed across his chest, causing his personal energy shielding to flare. The heretic leader had drawn a pair of Plasma Rifles and he fired them at Thel, who backpedalled towards he nearest cover.

Despite this, his shielding was still drained by the incoming fire. Thel grunted in pain as a pair of plasma bolts hit him on his unshielded plates, distorting the shape. He still felt the heat of the bolts burn his skin.

He was able to duck behind a nearby pillar. As he waited for his energy shield to regenerate, he heard the heretic's thruster pack activating. When he glanced at his opponent, he saw him standing upon the Seraph fighter. He was facing away from Thel, but he still spoke,

"The Sangheili are blind, Arbiter! But I will make them see!"

With that, he released two small orbs from his hands, which flew through the air towards Thel, making a whooping sound as they approached. Thel watched as the two holodrones landed on the ground in front of Thel. There was a flash and a faint popping noise, and suddenly Thel was looking at a pair of duplicate heretic leaders. Both holograms, turned toward Thel, each with two Plasma Rifles in their hands.

* * *

><p>Sesa 'Refumee watched as his two holographic duplicates opened fire simultaneously on the Arbiter's position. He needed to be off this station within the next few minutes, before the gas mine was pulled too far into the maelstrom. As much as he still hated it, Thel 'Vadamee was going to have to die, for he was going to be a constant threat to him if he lived.<p>

Reasoning with the hardheaded Sangheili had failed, and so he would have to be killed. Sesa was going to have to continue spreading his word. Even without the gas mine, he had sent a force of his soldiers to a moon named Basis, in orbit of the gas giant Threshold, where they had established a presence. When he arrived, he could maybe once again rally an army to rival the Covenant's might.

Sesa knew that the Covenant was eventually going to crumble. When and

how he didn't know, but it would. It was unlikely that the humans would be able to defeat the Covenant, but over time, the Covenant would begin to fragment when news of the truth of the Halo Rings began to spread. It would shatter, and the false 'Great Journey' would never occur. Only when this happened would Sesa find peace.

With a flash of blinding blue light and destructive energy, the Plasma Grenade detonated, obliterating the stuck hologram. Thel rolled under the second duplicate's stream of fire and returned fire with his own rifle. The hologram flickered a pale blue laced with electrical lines, before vanishing in a pop, causing the small holodrone to fall to the floor. Thel then turned to the heretic leader, but the coward had already maneuvered into one of the large vents spaced at regular intervals along the top of the walls.

Even as he looked up to the ceiling, he heard the heretic taunting him.

"How did the Prophets buy your loyalty, Arbiter?" He shouted. "With a new command, a new fleet? Or was it the promiseâ€¢ their Great Journey?"

"Listen to yourself, fool!" Thel retorted. "Are you even aware of what you are saying?"

"Oh yes, Arbiter! I know what I am saying. I am telling you that your Covenant is going to come to a crashing halt very soon." My word has been spread. There are those within the Covenant who are aware of the truth that has been denied so long to them by the Prophets. Just wait. Your 'glorious Empire will lie in ruins!"

"No, not while I still draw breath. By the Writ of Union, I swear to this!"

* * *

><p>After several minutes of fighting with the heretic leader, who had tried to use multiple holographic representations of himself to try and kill Thel, he decided that he would have to kill 'Refumee very soon, before the station finally plummeted into the maelstroms raging might. The braggart was flapping his jaws, mocking Thel from the safety of an air vent. He was gloating about the transcendence of the Forerunners.</p>

"Come, Arbiter. Let me show you where they went."

The leader descended this time without the aid of holograms. He flew forward, firing his Plasma Rifles. Thel rolled behind a barrier to keep from getting killed. The heretic was getting impatient. They both knew that they had little time left, and 'Refumee was determined to finish Thel now.

When he drew near, Thel leapt from cover, and smashed his fist into the heretic's stomach. His energy shielding cushioned the blow, but he was still thrown off balance. Thel grabbed him and thrust him into a nearby pillar. He released his Plasma Rifles, which clattered onto the floor. The heretic kicked out, knocking Thel back but when he tried to swing, Thel grabbed his arm, yanking it down before wrapping his arms around the heretic's body and lifting him up and over his

head. The heretic leader crashed to the floor, and before he could get up Thel kicked him in the face, shattering his goggles and breaking several teeth. Purple blood flew through the air as the heretic howled in pain.

Without pause, Thel drew his Energy Sword, and with a flash he thrust it through his foe's abdomen. The blade passed straight through and into the pillar.

Looking down at the mortally wounded heretic, Thel felt a tinge of remorse for his former comrade. He had known Sesa well throughout his time as shipmaster on the Seeker of Truth. Never had he thought that it would be himself ending his friend's life.

Coughing up blood, and fighting to stay conscious, the heretic leader lifted his head to meet Thel's gaze.

"This isn't the end, old friend." He gasped as his insides were being vaporized by the swords extreme heat. Eyes flowing with unbidden tears, he struggled to speak, "very soonâ€| you will witness the full extent of the Prophets betrayal.

"Soon, you shall see for yourself... the Covenant be damnedâ€| the heretic trailed off as he slipped out of consciousness.

Thel simply stood and stared down at Sesa 'Refumee's corpse. He closed his eyes, hoping that his old friend would at least find some measure of peace in the next life.

Thel was disturbed from his prayer by the Oracle, who had floated down to take in the sight of the heretic's corpse. "Unfortunate." It buzzed. "His edification was most enjoyable."

"I had no choice, Holy Oracle. Heâ€| he imperiled the Great Journey." Thel said, aware of the slight uneasiness in his voice.

"Oracle? Great Journey?" The Oracle said in a genuinely confused tone. "Why do you meddlers insist on using such inaccurate verbiage? Ohhhh myyyyy! A large blue electronic pulse enveloped the Oracle suddenly, tearing him away.

Thel spun around and watched as the Oracle was pulled outside the hangar bay door to the platform where a Phantom dropship hovered.

In truth, Thel hadn't heard the hangar opening, with the noise of the storm. The Oracle was pulled to the lone figure which stood under the Phantom. It latched onto the head of a massive stone hammer. The beast wielding it, Thel recognized, an anger bubbling up from within.

Tartarus.

What was this barbarian doing here? Thel mused. He watched as the large Jiralhanae pulled the Oracle off his hammer, his unholy claws gripping its casing.

"Thatâ€| is the Oracle!" he said, shaking with rage at the vermin's disrespect.

Thel watched in outrage as Tartarus casually threw the Oracle into

the Phantoms gravity lift. Thel was at a lack of words. The Jiralhanae were truly beasts to be despised. They showed no sanctity when dealing with holy artifacts, and were unconcerned by any collateral damage incurred when in the presence of a holy site. These feral creatures were surely damned for their sins.

"So it is." Tartarus said in a neutral tone, indifferent to the sacrilege he had just committed. "Come, we are leaving this system."

With no other choice, Thel boarded the Phantom, still resentful of being in such close proximity to the Jiralhanae. Once he was on-board, the dropship accelerated to its maximum speed. Thel was unsure if they would be able to make it, being so deep into the super storm. He shook his head at the possibility of surviving the mine and completing his objective, only to perish on the exfiltration.

Somehow, the Phantom managed to get clear of the maelstrom's reach. They began to make the journey back to High Charity, which was somewhere nearby, in the vicinity of the destroyed Halo Ring.

Thinking of the ring world made Thel once again recall what had happened in the last few units. Too much had happened, and what was supposed to have been a simple assassination mission had turned out to be a great deal more complicated.

With a sudden weariness coming upon him, Thel eased himself back against the bulkhead, closing his eyes; his mind troubled.

**Whew! Thank goodness that chapter is done. That took a LONG time to write. Sorry it's so long. I can become a bit long-winded when writing, so please bear with me. Combined with school work and university (or college for you American folks!) applications, I have very free spare time. When I do I try to write. Tonight I have made a concentrated effort to finish this chapter. (It's two in the morning here, with school tomorrowâ€¦ URGH!) So here it is. Please read and review â€“ very much appreciated!**

5. Chapter 5 - The Start of a Schism

Disclaimer â€“ Sorry, still don't own Halo. Maybe one day eh?
:P

**Author's Note: PLEASE READ! This chapter takes place slightly before the events of the Gas Mine, on October 20****th**_**, during the Battle of Mombasa, just after Regrets carrier has jumped away from the city, around about the events of Halo 3: ODST. I have written this to display some of the earliest events in the Great Schism, with the murder of remaining Sangheili infantry by the Jiralhanae, upon Truth's orders. **_

**Do not fear, however. The next chapter will resume the story of the Arbiter, our favourite Sangheili of the Halo series. And yes, when telling the story from a Covenant member's perspective, humans will be referred to as 'it' and as 'aliens' and whatnot, as that is what the Covenant sees humanity as â€“ little more than vermin.**

The Arbiter's Tale

Chapter 5

The Start of a Schism

Sangheili Major Arvo 'Korahee fired several shots from his Plasma Rifle, melting the human soldier's skull and causing the smaller creature to crumple to the ground. Running to cover behind a destroyed human vehicle to avoid its compatriot's retaliatory gunfire, 'Korahee readied himself to flank the human, who was entrenched in cover of its own.

The Sangheili was on one of the many winding streets within the human city of 'New Mombasa.' The street was littered with the outcome of fierce combat, with burned-out husks of vehicles both human and Covenant scattered about, damaged infrastructure, corpses and smears of conglomeration blood. This devastation had been amplified by the departure of the High Prophet of Regret's Assault Carrier, which had initiated a slipspace jump while in close proximity to the city.

Ever since the fleet had arrived in this system, the ensuing battle had been disastrous for the Covenant. Regret's undersized Fleet of Sacred Consecration had attacked the planet that was the supposed location of the Portal that would lead to the Ark, and the Covenant's salvation.

Regret was expecting it to be a poorly defended colony world. Instead the world appeared to be another massive hub of military operations similar to 'Reach', or it was indeed the home world of the human race. Unfortunately this planet boasted orbital defences unlike any the Covenant had faced, far greater than there had been at Reach.

The space battle had been incredibly costly for the fleet. Despite the Covenants technological superiority, the sheer number of human ships and Orbital Defence Platforms were too much. While the Covenant were able to inflict casualties, it was a losing battle and in a desperate attempt to make landfall and search for the Portal, Regret had powered his ship straight through the human defences and assaulted the city, 'Mombasa' as called by the humans which was the exact location the Portal was expected to be.

Regret had immediately deployed large amounts of infantry from his carrier to scour the area for signs of the Portal. Unfortunately, the human military had been able to mobilize faster than expected, and Regret's armies were faced with significant resistance from almost the first few units of deployment.

With constant human reinforcements arriving in the city, the Covenant ground forces found themselves being steadily pushed back. Additionally, there was no sign of this 'Portal' that was supposed to be somewhere in the city. In danger of being overrun, the Prophet of Regret ordered a full-scale retreat but before all forces were able to get back to the ship, Regret had jumped to slipspace, causing a large scale electromagnetic explosion and a blinding flash of light. In the following confusion, the abandoned ground forces fell into disarray, scattered and leaderless.

The human army was likewise disorientated and separated. The bitter street-to-street war continued, with pockets of opposing combatants continuing to fight whenever they happened upon each other.

The air was still thick with electromagnetic particles, the residue from the slipspace jump, and the sky was bluish-white with this fallout. A strong wind caused the particles to drift down sideways. This peaceful illusion starkly contrasted with the carnage that had happened below.

'Korahee grunted and peered around the burned-out vehicle. His opponent was crouched behind one of the metal barricades that the human military used for protection. This allowed it a reasonable degree of protection. He fired a burst from his Plasma Rifle at the barrier, but the plasma was ineffective at damaging it, leaving only slight scoring.

As 'Korahee deduced how he would flank this threat, a bright green flash erupted from somewhere out of his line of sight. 'Korahee recognised it as a shot from a Carbine. He heard the shot impact the human behind the barrier with a wet thuck. A scream of agony arose from behind the barrier before it was cut off by a second shot.

'Korahee lowered his weapon when he saw that it was another Sangheili who had fired the shots. The Sangheili had two Unggoy in tow. Both of them wielded Plasma Pistols, and had that ever-present look of fear or unease that was typical of the Unggoy race.

"Brother 'Jaromee!" 'Korahee called out, raising his arm in greeting. 'Jaromee was a Minor Sangheili, and thus was clad in the simplistic blue-coloured combat harness that befitting his rank as opposed to the more ornate red armour that 'Korahee adorned. He knew 'Jaromee well, and knew that the young warrior thirsted to prove himself in battle. To have survived the last few units testified to his prowess.

"Excellency!" 'Jaromee replied, bowing his head. "It is truly a relief to cross paths with another Sangheili."

"Quite so. How do you fare, brother?" 'Korahee asked.

"I fare well, excellency, thank you. When the Holy One left this city my file fell into disarray. We came under attack from human forces, and I lost the Unggoy under my command. Breaking contact, I made my way through these cramped alleyways, seeking out any Covenant forces that I could find. The two Unggoy you see with me I found cowering inside a human dwelling. I coerced them to follow me.

"It is then that I happened upon that human, and knowing that it was in combat with our troops I killed it."

"Ah, my tale is similar, although I have been alone since the jump." 'Korahee said. He had lost his lance prior to the Prophets jump. Minor Sangheili 'Asanulee and six Unggoy had been slain during the retreat to the landing zone. The humans were using their structures and knowledge of the territory to their advantage in combat, firing down on the Covenant from the windows in buildings and from various other hard-to-reach spots.

The Covenant was ill-prepared for this form of warfare, and the close quarters did not allow them to use their vehicles effectively. As a result, the humans were able to destroy them with heavy ordinance.

"Pardon my impulsiveness, excellency. This one recommends that we continue onward, lest we make ourselves targets for human snipers." The Minor Sangheili bowed his head in respect as he spoke.

"I believe that this is a good choice, Brother 'Jaromee, for I wish to make it off this gods forsaken planet if at all possible."

* * *

><p>Jiralhanae Commander Cerberus stood with his burly arms behind his back, watching from the bridge of his Assault Carrier Eternal Servitude as an armada of Type 52 Phantom Troop Carriers deployed legions of fresh Jiralhanae-led reinforcements into the embattled city of New Mombasa.</p>

Cerberus was truly a magnificent specimen of the Jiralhanae species. Standing at a height of over ten feet, and weighing in at 1700 pounds, Cerberus was a giant even among his own species. Cerberus had seen decades of combat, and he had the wounds to prove it — a large scar given to him by one of the augmented human soldiers, or 'Demons' ran vertically down his face, through his left eye and down to his mouth, which bristled with large predatory teeth.

Despite the hindrance of having only one eye, Cerberus was still more than capable of commanding his ships and armies. No living creature would dare to say otherwise.

In addition to his physical prowess, Cerberus was also fiercely intelligent, far more so than the Sangheili gave the Jiralhanae credit for. This combined attributes made Cerberus one of the most formidable fighters in his species. He was an impressive sight, standing at the fore of his command centre, clad in his red Commander Armour. He preferred to stand rather than use the gravity chair that shipmasters usually used

To top it off, Cerberus was also the brother of Tartarus, Chieftain of the Jiralhanae, who was effectively the leader of the species and the one who represented the interests of the Jiralhanae in the Covenant. As a relative of such a powerful one, it was natural that Cerberus would also hold a very high position in the Covenant Empire.

He had been given orders by Truth to take his fleet to the human planet 'Earth' to finish what Regret had started. While Regret had taken an ill-prepared small fleet to the planet, Truth had known about Earth and its significance for many weeks and he had been preparing his fleet at the space station Unyielding Hierophant.

Unfortunately, the space station was destroyed but Truth still had access to a large number of ships, which he had passed command over to Cerberus to take to Earth when he received news of Regrets hasty attack. The larger, better prepared fleet was able to punch a hole in human orbital defences and deploy significant numbers of ground

forces groundside. Cerberus had himself wiped out a number of the inferior human ships.

More warships were to arrive to attack other zones on the planet deemed to be of strategic importance. Cerberus was to focus his efforts on New Mombasa, and to eventually begin excavation of the Portal, which had been partially revealed by the slipspace jump made by Regret.

'At least the fool has done something beneficial.' Cerberus thought to himself.

In addition, he had been given another order by Truth: Execute all Sangheili troops that still remained in the city. Cerberus, who was well-renowned for his burning hatred of the Sangheili, even among Jiralhanae, took particular glee in this and wasted no time in sending his heavily armed Jiralhanae units to the surface to carry out the order.

Cerberus' only regret was that he had to remain on his ship and conduct operations from there. He would have given anything to be among his warriors as they descended on the wearied Sangheili stragglers, to smash Sangheili bones with his bare fists and to tear Sangheili flesh with his teeth.

Cerberus knew that his subordinates would take similar delight in their mission. Ever since the Jiralhanae had been inducted into the Covenant, they had been kept down by the Sangheili, who saw them as potential threats to their power. Jiralhanae had been shunned by the Sangheili, given the most mundane of tasks, and were rarely brought into theatres of war.

Things looked set to change, however. Due to the recent abundance of failures by the Sangheili to prevent the humans from destroying sites of importance to the Covenant such as the Unyielding Hierophant and the Sacred Ring, and the Jiralhanae's unwavering faith in the Great Journey, The Hierarchs were deciding that it was time to replace the Sangheili's position as military commanders with the Jiralhanae.

This removal of Sangheili ground forces on Earth was only the beginning, and Cerberus knew that the Hierarchs had plans to deal with the Sangheili leadership, to cripple the species and make them easy targets for the Jiralhanae. Cerberus was only too happy to play his part.

* * *

><p>Minor 'Jaromee pointed up at the sky, where it was possible to see multiple Phantom dropships descending from the atmosphere, which was still being disturbed by slipspace residue that had yet to settle. 'Korahee felt a sense of elation as he realised that Covenant reinforcements were being deployed. He had thought that Regret's fleet had been decimated in orbit but it was possible that there was another surviving ship, or more likely another, better equipped Covenant fleet had arrived.<p>

As several Phantoms passed over the small force's position. 'Korahee noticed that the majority of them were airlifting in Wraith tanks and Ghost attack vehicles. Several more carried Huragok pods. They were

escorted by Banshee ground support aircraft. This was a second, proper invasion, and the Covenant was back with the intention to win.

Although 'Korahee didn't know for definite, there was a chance that the Portal had been found, and the Covenant was deploying forces to secure it. The Great Journey may well be very close at hand.

'Korahee moved his mandibles into a grin. His small group would have to make it to a Covenant landing zone and report in. Then he may be assigned to another task, maybe seeking out human survivors, or maybe even helping secure the Portal! This opportunity to re-join the Covenant Army gave 'Korahee more incentive to push onwards through the embattled city.

* * *

><p>Jiralhanae Captain Barunus sniffed the air deeply, and with a short bark, sent his lance forward. The five squat Unggoy moved slowly up the street, scanning carefully with their Plasma Pistols for any signs of movement, both human and Sangheili. Ever since the order to kill any Sangheili that they came across had come down, Barunus had been anticipating his arrival on the planet. Long had he been waiting for an opportunity to kill the weaker creatures with their pompous superior attitudes. Now that the day was here, he was going to revel in it. This was the beginning of the end of the Sangheili race.</p>

He was clad in a full set of violet-coloured Jiralhanae power armour, which afforded him with a personal energy shield. The armour had the disadvantage of falling apart when the shielding failed, but this was compensated for by the fact that the Jiralhanae were naturally a very powerful and durable species.

The lance came across the bodies of several human soldiers, as well as Unggoy corpses and a Sangheili body. Growling, Barunus kicked the corpse. He had yet to come upon a living Sangheili. It was possible that in the battle before and immediately after Regret's slipspace jump, the combatants had wiped one another out. Had he missed out on the fun?

Finally, however, Barunus' fortune changed. While proceeding down one of the narrower human alleyways, he happened upon a Sangheili survivor. It was adorned in the blue colours of a Minor. Barunus bared his fangs.

An easy kill.

The Sangheili whipped around when it heard Barunus' lance approaching, but it lowered its Plasma Rifle when it seen who he was.

"Jiralhanae" it muttered under its breath. "What are you doing in this city? Are you with the reinforcements? "

"Yes, Sangheili. I am with the reinforcements. And before I kill you, know that your species no longer has a place in the Covenant. The Jiralhanae are dominant now!"

"Whatâ€| die heretic!" The Sangheili shouted, raising his Plasma Rifle but before it could fire it was hit by an overcharged shot from one of Barunus' Unggoy subordinates, draining its personal energy shield. Simultaneously the other Unggoy opened fire. The Sangheili roared in pain as plasma shots burned through its armour plating and then its bodysuit and flesh.

Barunus leapt forwards, smashing his large helmeted head into the Sangheili and knocking it into the concrete wall. It fell to the ground where Barunus stamped on it repeatedly, before rolling it onto its back. Several more Plasma Pistol shots to the legs prevented the Sangheili from getting up.

Barunus planted one of his large, two-toed feet on the Sangheili's chest and unlimbered his Type 25 Grenade Launcher, or Brute Shot. This large weapon had a massive curved blade affixed beneath its main frame. He pointed the barrel of the grenade launcher into the Sangheili's face.

Barely alive, the Sangheili coughed up purple blood. Its eyes met Barunus' and the glare could not have been more hate filled. Barunus returned the stare with a short laugh of victory, before jerking the arm that held the barrel of the Brute Shot up and simultaneously moving the arm that grasped the firing mechanism down. As a result, the blade of the Brute Shot sliced the Sangheili open vertically from the lower stomach to the neck. Blood sprayed as the Sangheili weakly convulsed.

Snarling in victory, Barunus pressed down on the Sangheili's split chest with his foot before removing it.

"Onward!" He shouted at his Unggoy. "The rest of this pitiful race will soon follow suit."

As Barunus walked away, the Unggoy moved past the mortally wounded Sangheili without looking at it. All except for one, who waited until its leader was out of earshot before it lowered its Plasma Pistol and mercifully finished the Sangheili off with a blast to the head.

* * *

><p>'Korahee scanned the street ahead with his Plasma Rifle. Similar to the others he had traversed, it was filled with the detritus of combat. A Wraith tank had somehow been flipped over in the middle of the street, and the tarmac of the road was destroyed by plasma impacts. In addition to the presence of multiple corpses, both human and Covenant, it was easy for 'Korahee to see that a fierce battle had been waged here.<p>

He waved the Unggoy forward before following himself. He was constantly on alert, sweeping high and low with his weapon. Even though there were no humans in sight, didn't mean that they were not around. Several of the buildings still had intact portions, and there was always the possibility of a human sniper hiding away, waiting for an opportune moment to pick off a ranking Covenant member.

"What do you think, brother?" 'Korahee asked his younger comrade. The Minor Sangheili looked at him briefly, although he remained on alert.

"I do not know, excellency. We have seen no further signs of the humans. But these signs of battle speak for themselves. They were here. I believe they may have pulled back upon seeing our dropships entering the city. I fear that they will be regrouping and assembling for another attack." 'Jaromee paused for a moment, and then added, "Or maybe we have killed them all."

"I have fought the humans many times before, young one." 'Korahee said. "I believe that your former assumption is most likely correct. But likewise we will prepare ourselves onward. In the glory of the Covenant, we shall not fail until we have what we came for.

"I have spotted several of our Phantoms landing several nearby. By my reckoning the landing zone is on the other side of this group of buildings. Come, let us hasten to them."

'Korahee and his small lance emerged from the building into another war-wracked area. The clearing looked as though it had been a parking area for the human's small civilian vehicles, but it had been heavily damaged during the battle. The few vehicles that remained were useless twisted wrecks. A large blackened area of cauterized tar marked where a plasma mortar had landed, devastating a human barrier. 'Korahee saw the charred corpses of those unlucky humans who had been hit.

In addition there were many Covenant corpses in the area. Most of them were Sangheili, 'Korahee noticed. They were lying at various angles around the area. How they had been killed was what caused him to shake in anger.

Rather than having been felled by human projectiles as he would have thought, 'Korahee noticed that the bodies had foot long spikes sticking out of them. Looking around, he saw many more spikes embedded in the walls of nearby buildings. This was not the humans work.

Jiralhanae!

Those spikes were the ammunition of the Type 25 'Spiker' Carbine, the Jiralhanae's favourite handheld weapon. It was horribly clear to 'Korahee that the treacherous creatures had slain the Sangheili in cold blood. Feeling a wave of nausea hit him, 'Korahee lowered his arms and screamed his rage into the heavens.

"Ah, look pack brothers. Another two yet survive" a deep voice from behind him boomed. 'Korahee already knew it belonged to a Jiralhanae.

'Korahee whipped around, roaring in anger, his Plasma Rifle firing before he had even turned. A large pack of Jiralhanae had happened upon the grieving Sangheili. Even as he unleashed a torrent of blue-white fire from his rifle, 'Korahee saw that the pack was composed of mainly teal coloured Jiralhanae Minors, with a smaller number of Majors and Ultras. There were also several Captains and one large Chieftain, who was clad in highly ornate red and black plated power armour.

'Korahee already knew his lance was heavily outnumbered, and as he burned one of the weaker Minors down, he saw the two Unggoy go down under a flurry of spikes from multiple Spikers. 'Korahee's Plasma

Rifle overheated and he dropped the burning weapon before desperately trying to get off the street and into the cover of a building.

He heard a loud, sickening crunch as the rampaging Chieftain swung his Gravity Hammer full force into Minor 'Jaromee's chest. The Sangheili was flung through the air, blood flying everywhere from his shattered body. He was dead before he hit the ground.

Roaring, 'Korahee rolled out of the way of Spiker projectiles and Brute Shot grenades, sweeping up a deceased Sangheili's Energy Sword hilt as he rose. With a flash he activated the weapon, the blade of pure plasma forming before him. Bellowing a vengeful war cry, he leapt at the Jiralhanae.

'Korahee was able to cut through several Jiralhanae before they began to overwhelm him. His personal energy shield gave out under the oncoming Spiker rounds, and he felt several puncture the flesh of his side and back. Falling to his knees in pain, 'Korahee continued to swing the sword, slicing an incoming Jiralhanae Major's legs off at the knees. The beast roared in eternal pain as it crashed heavily to the ground.

The Sangheili felt something heavy crash into his side, shattering ribs and causing him to be flung to the ground. The Energy Sword flew out of his hand and when it impacted the ground, its failsafe activated, destroying the weapon.

He looked around as the surviving Jiralhanae encroached on him, roaring in anger and determined to finish him off. They immediately stopped in their tracks at a short and sharp bark from the Chieftain.

The Chieftain slung his Gravity Hammer on his back and approached until he was standing over the Sangheili. Laughing, he addressed 'Korahee.

"You have fought well, Sangheili. For that you have my respect. But in the end, it wasn't enough. Nothing that the Sangheili species do is ever going to be enough."

"Whatâ€¢ what are you speaking of, _beast?" '_Korahee muttered, struggling to remain conscious due to the blood loss inflicted by the Spiker projectiles.

"The Hierarchs have seen fit to cast your useless species out of our Covenant." The massive Jiralhanae growled. "Through the Sangheili's incompetence, the humans have impeded our progress time and time again. No longer. The Prophet of Truth has ordered the Jiralhanae to assume control of this battle. Throughout the rest of the Covenant, we are already being provided the resources necessary to carry out genocide on the Sangheili.

"You are only the beginning. Soon the rest of your verminous species will follow suit."

"You will never get away with this!" Shouted 'Korahee angrily.

"Ah, but we are already having our way with it, right now." The Jiralhanae chuckled. "Dranerus, kill him." The Chieftain shot 'Korahee one final glare before walking away. The pack of assembled

Jiralhane watched as the Captain Dranerus aimed his Spiker at the Sangheili's head. 'Korahee closed his eyes, and waited for his great journey to begin.

The metallic _fsaaam _of the Spiker firing was the last thing 'Korahee ever heard.

* * *

><p>Cerberus huffed happily as he read the reports that came in on the large table that occupied the centre of the Eternal Servitude's large bridge. The holographic readings told him that the mission was proceeding as planned. In the last several units, he had been able to deploy large numbers of infantry and armour into the city, facing only scattered resistance from the humans. In addition, he was receiving word from his Captains and Chieftains that they had been able to round up and slaughter many Sangheili.</p>

He had received orders from the High Prophet of Truth to begin excavation of the Portal immediately. He would bring his ships in close, where they were to use their energy projectors to excavate the Portal. Even though Regrets slipspace jump had exposed a small section, it was going to take several weeks to completely uncover the artefact.

In that time, they had to hold off the humans, but Cerberus was not concerned. This would not be a problem. With large scale troop deployments occurring in the area, and his ships keeping the human navy busy in space, Cerberus knew that there was no way for the Covenant to be stopped.

Soon the Covenant would ascend through the Portal and arrive at the Ark, and there, the Great Journey would begin. They will transcend to the divine beyond, and the unworthy would be left behind.

**Wowâ€| Finally that chapter is done. Despite being relatively short this was fairly hellish to write. I took me forever to come up with an idea for the chapter. It was actually fairly recently that I decided on writing a chapter showing some of the first actions of the Great Schism. It was included just to show how the Jiralhane took pleasure in freely slaughtering the Sangheili for the first time, and helps to show them as terrible creatures of destruction and blind devotion to the Prophets â€" so I decided it was necessary.**

**Oh yeah, that Jiralhane Commander Cerberus is going to become a fairly significant character later in the fanfic. Suffice to say he is the highest ranking Brute besides Tartarus, holding a similar rank to the Army Commander from Halo Wars. He will be a primary antagonist in the story.**

**And yes, he is named after Cerberus, the three headed dog of Greek mythology that guarded the entrance of Hades. **

_**I will try to start work on the next chapter as soon as possible, where we shall return to the familiar shoes of the Arbiter.

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6. Chapter 6 - The Sentinel Wall

Disclaimer -- I don't own Halo. Never have, _extremely _unlikely I ever will.

The Arbiter's Tale

Chapter 6

The Sentinel Wall

As Thel 'Vadamee stepped off the lift and into the large, ornate Sanctum of the Hierarchs, he was met with a terrible sight -- Jiralhanae stripping the armour off Sangheili Honor Guardsmen. Throughout the chamber, Jiralhanae were either receiving pieces of armour and adorning it themselves, or fiddling around with the Guardsmen's energy staves. Even as he watched, several more Jiralhanae passed by him on either side, moving quickly to acquire any remaining pieces of Honor Guardsman equipment.

'_Truly, these creatures are barbarians'_ thought Thel, as he walked down the central path towards the large gold-lit doors that led to the Inner Sanctum. The aesthetic beauty of the room was spoiled by the presence of such savages. Ordinarily, no species were permitted in the Sanctum other than the Hierarchs themselves and their protectors.

'_What is happening?_'

Like the majority of rooms in High Charity, the Sanctum of the Hierarchs was massive, with very little machinery serving to reduce its scale. It was very dimly lit, with small light sources high up on the walls doing little to dispel the gloom.

Several large levitating pillars were positioned at intervals on either side of the path. These decorative effects were the only real structures in the room, besides several small consoles in a sunken area closer to the Inner Sanctum.

As he neared the doors, he heard snarling behind him. Turning his head, he saw two Jiralhanae fighting over an Honor Guardsman's helm. The short fight was ended when one Jiralhanae smashed the helmet hard into the others head, knocking the beast out cold. Huffing happily, the victor proudly placed the helm over its head.

Growling under his breath and muttering incomprehensible curses under his breath, Thel waited for the doors to switch from a soft gold colour to a pulsating purple. The doors then opened, first the sides opened, than the main door split in two, allowing Thel to enter.

Thel walked between two fully clad Jiralhanae Honor Guardsmen holding energy staves in their bestial paws. They silently watched him as he passed, heading for the far corner, where he saw two of the Hierarchs in conversation with several Sangheili.

As he neared the group, he heard the Prophet of Truths voice "â€œ| a Hierarch is dead, Commander."

The leader of the Sangheili troupe was Special Operations Commander

Rtas 'Vadumee himself. I was he who had led the attack on the Gas Mine, and through his excellent command, ensured that most of his team were able to escape before the station plunged into the Gas Giant Threshold's volatile atmosphere. Thel and 'Vadumee had happily greeted one another after the former had returned from his successful mission at the Gas Mine.

"His murderer was within our grasp" the Commander said, the anger going unchecked in his voice. "If you had not withdrawn our Phantomsâ€|"

"Are you questioning my decision? Truth cut him off before he could say another word. Although he didn't raise his voice, the question was laden with menace, and Thel judged it would be wise for the Commander to hold his tongue.

'Vadumee quickly shook his head. "No, Holy One. I only wish to express my concern that the Jiralhanaeâ€|"

Again, the Commander was cut off by Truth, who raised his hand, long fingers faced outwards to indicate that he be silent.

"Re-commissioning the guards was a radical stepâ€| but recent events have made it abundantly clear that the Sangheili _cannot _guarantee our safety."

"I shall relay your decisionâ€| to the Council." 'Vadumee bowed his head, voice laden with disappointment, before turning to leave the chamber, his Special Operations Sangheili in tow. As they passed by Thel, who waited nearby, the Commander nodded wearily to him. Thel returned the gesture and then walked up to the Hierarchs.

"Politicsâ€| how tiresome" the Prophet of Truth muttered, as much to Thel as to himself. As he faced the leaders of the Covenant, Truth addressed him directly.

"Do you know, Arbiter? The Sangheili have threatened to resign. To quit the High Council. Because of thisâ€| _exchange of hats?_

Thel felt anger boil up inside him. Ever since the Sangheili and San Shyuum had formed the Covenant, their race had been the guardians of the San Shyuum as they scoured the galaxy for Forerunner artefacts. It was decreed in the Writ of Union. There was no changing it. Now, the Hierarchs were effectively destroying the Pact. It was an unforgivable insult to the Sangheili species.

All of a sudden, Thel heard in his mind the last words of Sesa 'Refumee, the commander of the heretic forces at the Gas Mine. Once a good friend of Thel, he had been forced to kill him in the name of the Covenant.

'_Very soonâ€| you will witness the full extent of the Prophets betrayal._'

Disturbed, Thel tried to force the thoughts out of his head, and he focused on replying to the Prophets. Still feeling anger inside him at the Hierarch's declaration, he chose his next words very carefully.

"We have always been your protectors." He stated, trying to keep his

voice level.

The reply that he received was as much of a trivial excuse as the 'exchange of hats.'

"These are trying times, for all of us."

"Even as the humans' annihilation filled us with satisfaction," the Prophet of Mercy piped up, "the loss of one of the Sacred Rings wracked our hearts with grief." The older Hierarch bowed his head in sadness.

"Putting aside our sorrow" Truth started, raising a hand. "We renewed our faith in the prophecy that other rings would be found. And see how our faith has been rewarded."

With that, he moved to the side, allowing Thel to observe the large view screen behind them. Thel was taken aback by the sight.

Another Halo Ring!

Thel could not believe his eyes. Truly this was a gift from the gods. The Covenant had another means of achieving the Great Journey. After suffering terrible punishment for effectively stopping the Great Journey indefinitely in allowing the Demon to destroy the first Halo, here was another one. There was yet a chance!

Thel was inwardly happy that this time he was not still a Supreme Commander. While the post was an honor-filled and highly regarded one, he did not wish to be the one to let it be destroyed, as happened with the first Halo.

Only the lower side of a small section of the ring was visible. Thel could see the metallic structures and latticework that formed the true structure of the ring. However this was not all that the ring consisted of; Thel knew that the inner-facing surface was alive with forests, tundra, deserts and oceans, for this was what he had seen at the first Sacred Ring. The rings had breathable atmosphere, and were highly capable of sustaining life.

The Prophet of Mercy spread his arms wide in a prayer pose, bowing his head in reverence as he spoke.

"Halo! Its divine winds will rush through the stars, propelling all who are worthy along the path to salvation."

"Put how to start this process?" Truth said, thoughtfully stroking the wattle that hung under his chin. "For ages, we searched for one who might unlock the secrets of the ring. An Oracle. And with your help we found it."

The two Covenant leaders turned, and so Thel did so too. He found himself facing the central pedestal in the room, which the Oracle now hovered above. It was held in a stasis field that extended from the pedestal up to another generator above.

As he looked upon the Oracle, Thel again remembered the heretic leader's words.

No, he told himself. He could not let thoughts like that trouble

him. Not now, when in the presence of the Sacred Ring, and the start of the Covenant's Great Journey.

Thel had been brought up to be a true believer in the Covenant religion, and he wasn't going to be so easily dissuaded.

"With appropriate humility we plied the Oracle with questions." Mercy told Thel as they moved closer. "And it, with clarity and grace, has shown usâ€œ the key." He finished, pressing a symbol on the armrest of his gravity throne.

Beside the Oracle, the holographic representation of a small, roughly 'T' shaped object came into existence, slowly rotating in the air. It was composed of a grey casing, with luminous green lighting down the sides of the longer section of its body. Simple in construction, the artefact still exuded importance from its very being.

"You shall journey to the surface of the ring and retrieve this Sacred Icon." The Prophet of Truth addressed Thel.

"With it, we shall fulfil our promise."

The Prophet of Mercy raised his arms. "Salvation for all!" the older Hierarch proclaimed.

"And begin the Great Journey." Truth added. Regarding the Icon for several heartbeats, Thel then turned to Truth.

"I shall depart at once, Your Eminence." He said. "I require no assistance on this mission, for I believe that it is necessary for me alone to carry out my task. In failing to prevent the destruction of the first Holy Ring, I shall bring glory to our Covenant in allowing us to begin the Great Journey here.

"Ah." Stated the Prophet of Truth. "I have sent other teams before you, but I have not received any word from them, so I believe they have been compromised. You will succeed where they have failed."

"Yes, Holy One." Thel said obediently.

"Excellent." Truth began. "You are a fine warrior. You succeeded in ending the heretic leader, and I believe that you will too succeed on this mission. Go. Bring glory to the Covenant. Do not fail us."

Thel bowed down deeply, "Yes, my lord. I will not fail."

Turning, Thel strode out of the chamber. Another mission, another chance to prove his worth to the Covenant. This was his most important mission yet. As the Arbiter, he was going to find this Sacred Icon. No longer was he going to fail the Covenant. He would be remembered as the one who made the Great Journey possible.

Once the Sangheili had left the room, the Prophet of Truth turned to his fellow Hierarch.

"So, the mighty Arbiter has returned victorious from his mission at the mine." He said. "When I heard this news, I was most troubled, noble Mercy. It was expected that he would die there. But no, instead the Sangheili somehow survived. He needs to be killed before I

implement my plans for the new Covenant. I do have a plan to deal with him, however."

Truth tapped a button on his gravity throne.

"Tartarus, report to the Sanctum of the Hierarchs right now." Truth said, before pressing the button again, cutting Tartarus off.

The older Prophet of Mercy looked at him, large eyes meeting Truth's. "How goes your fleet's uncovering of the Portal?"

"Excavation will soon be complete." Truth assured him. "My faithful Commander Cerberus heads the effort. Brother, that warrior demonstrates typifies the unwavering faith and obedience of the Jiralhanae species. While they are a primitive race, the Jiralhanae are perfect for our means. They do not hold the foolish virtues of honour that the Sangheili are burdened by. We have no need for the Sangheili anymore. Time after time they have failed our Covenant, and it is time to rid ourselves of them."

Mercy nodded in understanding. The opposite door opened, and Tartarus strode in, his large Gravity Hammer, the Fist of Rukt slung over his back. He marched over to the Hierarchs, before dropping into a deep bow before them.

"Your Eminence, I am here as requested."

"Yes, Tartarus." Truth started. "I am sure you too have noticed that our prestigious Arbiter has returned quite unscathed from his previous mission. And this is a particular concern of mine."

Tartarus looked up, his orange eyes glowing in interest. "Yes, Holy One. I have noticed."

"Well, as you no doubt realise, he needs to be removed as a factor before we can continue our plans to be rid of the Sangheili." Truth mused. "I want you to transport the Arbiter to his destination, a wall on the Holy Ring that surrounds the Library, where the Sacred Icon is located.

"If the Arbiter should fall in battle, it is on your shoulders that the task of retrieving the Icon falls. If the Arbiter does succeed in his mission, you are to take the Icon from him and kill him. I do not wish to see him again.

"Now go. The Arbiter departs very soon. Go to him, and get him to his landing zone. Just two things: have the Sacred Icon in your possession, and ensure that the Arbiter is dead."

"Without question, Holy One." Tartarus bared his teeth in a barely-concealed grin. "You will be done."

Tartarus' Phantom accelerated at the maximum possible speed towards the surface of the Sacred Ring. Thel stood in the troop bay of the dropship with about half a dozen Jiralhanae. They were merely travelling on the dropship with Tartarus; they weren't part of Thel's mission.

This is a good thing too. Thel said to himself. This is a true

warrior's battle._

He hated being in such close proximity to the Jiralhanae, but thankfully it wouldn't be long as the ship was making good pace towards the wall. Unfortunately the Library was protected by a defensive energy barrier that was projected from this wall. It was the task of the Arbiter to push through to the locks that kept the barrier up, and deactivate it.

Once this was done, Tartarus would pick him up and transport him straight to the Library, where he would have the honour of retrieving the Sacred Icon and advancing the Covenant further in their quest to achieve the Great Journey.

Thel wasn't sure what to expect in terms of resistance, but he knew that other teams had tried to bring down the shield before, and had supposedly been killed, as they had stopped broadcasting. Thel packed a Carbine as his primary weapon, along with dual Plasma Rifles in reserve. He knew that humans had made landfall, but he was unsure if they knew about the Library. Still, he was ready for them. Evidently, there was _something_ there.

Thel could hear Tartarus telling the pilot to head to the Library immediately after the shield was deactivated due to his fear of keeping the Hierarchs waiting. Thel asked Tartarus a question that was on his mind.

"The human that killed the Prophet of Regretâ€| who was it?"

Even as he spoke, Thel felt a slight tightening in his gut.

"Who do you think?" Tartarus replied sarcastically.

I knew it!

"The Demon is here?" He asked in confirmation. He received a grunt of acknowledgement.

"Why? Looking for a little payback?" Asked Tartarus, a slightly mocking tone in his words.

Thel reached behind him, grasped his Carbine and readied it, pushing a clip into the receiver. "Retrieving the Icon is my only concern." He said. Inside, he would be happy if he never had to come across the Demon in combat. It which had slaughtered so many. Although he was loath to admit it, and it was an insult to the Sangheili's pride, but he was slightly frightened by the mythological being. It was rumoured among some in the Covenant that the Demons were long-dead soldiers reanimated by dark magic to fight the human's battles. Although Thel wasn't privy to these rumours, he was still sure that it was no normal human under the armour.

The Chieftain of the Jiralhanae laughed sceptically. "Of course."

_I wish the Demon would slay you, stupid oaf. _Thel said to himself.

He felt the Phantom decelerate as it neared Thel's destination â€“ the wall. It was a massive structure with several equally spaced towers that projected the barrier, a large sphere all around the

Library. The wall surrounded the whole Library, massive in both height and thickness.

The ship began to slow and the pilot activated the ships gravity lift. Breathing in, Thel walked into the lift, descending down onto a ledge that protruded out of a gap in the wall. The Phantom flew off as soon as he was safely down.

Thel took in his surroundings. He could see a Covenant communications node and several opened weapons crates. Thel could see several corpses of Unggoy and Kig-Yar soldiers still smoking as well as wreckage from Sentinels. There was plasma scoring on the walls and blood belonging to the fallen Covenant. The very ledge he stood on showed heavy damage, and it looked as though a large piece had been blown off.

Hazarding a guess, Thel concluded that a Covenant team had landed here, engaged the Forerunner constructs and taken casualties before moving on. Even as he surveyed the carnage, the Sangheili heard a loud mechanical groaning behind him. Thel turned, and found himself face-to-face with a massive hovering machine. It had a bulky body with one large glowing light near the top, two large legs that dangled below and a pair of smaller 'arms' which it raised ready to strike.

Without thinking, Thel raised his Carbine and fired several shots at the monster's eye. His fire seemed to have no effect, and the machine moved closer before a streak of plasma smashed into its right leg, completely mangling the limb and causing it to fall off. Tartarus' Phantom flew past.

"Lower the shield, Arbiter!" He shouted. "I'll pick you up when you've finished."

The hostile immediately turned and gave chase to the dropship, which flew away out of sight around the wall. Thel gave a silent thank-you to Tartarus and turned back around, ready to begin his mission.

Tartarus roared in frustration as the persistent Forerunner construct continued its pursuit of his Phantom.

"Pilot, stop!" He commanded. "It is weak, we must finish it. Bring your turrets to bear on its other leg." The pilot obeyed, and superheated red-white plasma flew out of the Phantom's trio of heavy plasma turrets. The plasma burned the machines one remaining leg as easily as it had done the first.

The 'Enforcer' shook the useless limb off but it was far from beaten. A large blue-coloured barrier blinked into life, shielding it from the front while a barrage of missiles flew out of the top of the machine. They were obviously mortars, as they flew up in a high arc before coming down with surprising speed towards the Covenant dropship.

"Move!" Tartarus bellowed at the pilot. The younger Jiralhanae did not need much persuading and he quickly jerked the bulky ship back, allowing the missile barrage to miss. "Quickly, keep up a storm of fire to break through that shield and then blow this pesky machine out of the sky."

Again the plasma turrets roared. The energy shield projected by the Enforcer seemed to be designed to resist ballistic projectiles, as it quickly fell in the face of the plasma blasts. The Phantom hosed the front of the machine with plasma, destroying its 'eye' and numerous other pieces, including what appeared to be smaller anti-personnel weapons. The Enforcer tried to launch another salvo of rockets, but the damage it was sustaining became too much. It exploded in a burst of flame, and the wrecked pieces fell to the ground far below.

Tartarus clapped the young pilot on the shoulder. "A fine kill." He complemented. "But I fear there will be more of those machines so stay vigilant. Hold while I locate the Arbiter." Tartarus checked a nearby console that was tracking the Sangheili. He saw that the Arbiter was getting near to one of the locks. He spoke into his communications unit.

"Arbiter, you are nearing one of the shield generators. Many of my Jiralhanae have fallen attempting to take it down." Tartarus said, remembering how several Jiralhanae in his pack had led the previous, failed attack on the core. He added in a cynical one,

"Let's see if you fare better."

Thel 'Vadamee waited for his overheated Plasma Rifles to cool down, before switching to his empty Carbine and slotting a new magazine in place. His journey through this first part of the wall had been harrowing â€“ the wall was heavily manned by Sentinels which were continually spawned through ports built into the walls and ceilings of the corridors. Thankfully he had not run into any more of the larger, floating automatons; the small cramped quarters didn't permit them room to function.

The various sections of the wall were separated by pistons which could only be accessed by one running their hand over the console that was present on them. They were one-way, as each time one opened; it lifted up off the ground leaving Thel to jump down to a lower level before the piston closed up again. Thel knew it had been designed with the Sentinels in mind. Due to the large presence of the Forerunner constructs, Thel found himself wondering what they were trying to defend from.

Thel had passed by many corpses of Covenant soldiers, primarily Unggoy and Kig-Yar, but he had also found several dead Jiralhanae. At first he questioned the presence of the Jiralhanae, as the Sangheili usually led such assaults. Thel knew this was a bad sign as it probably alluded to the Hierarch's newfound favouritism of the Jiralhanae.

Despite this, he had found no live Jiralhanae on his journey, instead only finding several cowering Unggoy and a lone Kig-Yar who were desperate to leave. Thel had told them that they were not going anywhere until they reached the shield controls so the lesser Covenant had no choice but to follow.

Eventually after navigating through nearly a dozen corridors filled with Sentinel guardians, Thel and his team â€“ three Unggoy and one Kig-Yar dropped down a final piston which took them to a small corridor which led them to the edge of a large open room which

consisted of multiple levels. Thel could see a large platform ahead, over which another of the larger machines hovered. Thel knew that they weren't the first to make it this far, as the blackened craters and strewn body parts suggested.

Immediately, Thel started to fire his Carbine at the monster, but each round was absorbed by a large blue barrier that projected from the front of it.

Tartarus' voice crackled through Thel's receiver. "It is useless to attack an Enforcer from the front, especially when its shields are up. Wait till it loses interest, and then strike the beast when its back is turned."

The Enforcer unleashed a massive barrage of mortars from its rear mounted rocket launcher. Bunched up in the small corridor, the Covenant team would be decimated.

"Go! Get out of the corridor!" Howled Thel, diving out of the enclosed space as the rockets began to fall. The slower Unggoy had no chance; they were blown apart even as they tried to move. The Kig-Yar's arm-mounted energy shield, despite being resistant to the majority of small-arms ballistic rounds offered no protection from explosive rounds and the avian Covenant unit was destroyed almost as fast as the Unggoy were.

By this time Thel had found cover in a lower part of the room. It wasn't completely safe, as the half-melted Jiralhanae's corpse told him, but it offered adequate protection from the Enforcers missiles. Losing sight of Thel the Enforcer drifted off; its limited artificial intelligence not allowing it the ability to further seek him out.

However, Thel did hear the hum of a Sentinel launcher as it activated on a nearby wall, the protective panel sliding up to expose its internal mechanisms. Almost immediately, an Aggressor Sentinel was produced, and the small construct flew into Thel's view.

The wary Sangheili fired several shots that staggered then destroyed the machine. He knew that it would be continually replaced until he destroyed the launcher so he engaged his armour's active camouflage and crept out of his temporary shelter. He spied the white-lit opening high up on the closest wall and he fired five shots, which destroyed the generator and caused an explosion which launched pieces of destroyed metal down onto the platform.

Unfortunately this exposed him to the Enforcer, and the patrolling machine locked onto him. Instead of bombarding him with another round of missiles, the large machine instead opened fire with a pair of smaller weapons behind its shield. A large number of solid red needles flew forth at a high speed towards the Sangheili. They resembled the ammunition of the Covenant Needler weapon, but as Thel leapt down a level to escape, he noticed with relief that they lacked the latter weapons homing ability.

Thel cloaked himself again and ran across the lower level of the platform before ascending a small ramp that led to the open upper level. The Enforcer was turned away so he drew a Plasma Grenade and hurled it with all his might. The small blue adhesive sphere flew through the air and stuck to the back of the Enforcer. When it

detonated, Thel saw a shower of sparks and pieces of metal go flying, but the machine remained in the air.

Growling in frustration, Thel withdrew before the Enforcer could draw a bead on him. These constructs can take some punishment, he thought. Thankfully they were not very bright, and Thel was able to come in from another angle with another grenade to the weakened section of the Enforcer. This second explosion was too much for the beast, and it exploded, showering the platform with large pieces of debris.

Sighing in relief, Thel turned his attention to four short yet sturdy pillars that were situated at roughly the edges of the platform. Tartarus spoke again to him.

"Those pillars you see, those are the locks that keep the shields power source in place. Overload them, Arbiter."

Thel paused in front of the closest one, before reaching out and touching the illuminated section in a similar way to how he had dealt with the pistons. Thankfully the operation was the same, and the cyan-coloured light switched to a deep blue and with a whirr, he heard the lock disengage.

He repeated this with the other three locks, and as soon as he had deactivated the final lock, he heard the squeak of machinery behind him. A small section of the platform rose up slightly, and Thel saw a small interface blink into life. Tartarus once again spoke to him.

"Release the power source. Now, find a way to remove it from its cradle."

Thel lowered his Carbine and approached the console. It consisted of several geometric lines with two separated parts that looked like they slotted in with the rest. There was also a protruding six-fingered 'hand' in the centre. It was obvious to Thel that this was where it was activated from. He pressed his hand palm down on the console. The hand withdrew and the two separated pieces locked in place.

For a moment nothing happened, than a loud explosion met Thel's ears as the remaining closed Sentinel launchers on the walls exploded simultaneously. The large doors opposite Thel opened, and the Sangheili was nearly knocked off balance as the platform suddenly sharply descended about 10 metres. Thel looked at the view ahead.

He could see another massive door that was closed in the distance, across a large expanse which the platform slowly began to move across. He watched as the large cyan-tinted energy barrier deactivated. It powered down from the top down to the towers, so it was a splendid sight as the glowing energy projected from beyond slowly vanished. Tartarus' Phantom passed by his platform and flew alongside him.

"Our path to the Library is clear." He informed Thel. "I'll pick you up on the ledge ahead."

The Phantom pulled ahead, where it waited by the closed doors for Thel's platform to get near enough. Eventually the doors did open,

but what Thel saw caused him to raise his Carbine in alert. Another Enforcer hovered high over the area where the platform was to come to rest, and it unleashed a barrage of missiles at the Phantom. Tartarus cursed as several of the missiles impacted the top of the ship, rocking it in the air.

"Blasted machines!" the Jiralhanae shouted. "Make your own way through the wall Arbitrator."

The Enforcer was not the only threat in the area. On the raised ledge, several large doors opened up and a slew of humanoid creatures leapt out. On first glance Thel thought they were human marines, due to their general profile and the fact that they possessed human weapons, but then he realised the truth.

The Flood is here.

The creatures were combat forms, similar to those he had encountered on the Gas Mine, however unlike those ones; these were not derived from Sangheili. Instead these combat forms were human soldiers infested by the Flood parasite. They still wore remnants of combat armour on their bodies, but from their upper torso protruded the controlling infection form, which had forced the human's necks roughly aside. The sensory tentacles waved in the air as the infection form directed the corpse about. Thel could see the massive clawed appendage that had replaced one of the human arms.

The Flood forms wielded an assortment of human rifles, submachine guns and pistols which they fired up at the Enforcer. Furthermore, several more Sentinel launchers opened up on the walls, and the Forerunner guardians emerged firing their beams in an effort to cut down the parasitic outbreak.

Thel's platform came to a halt, and rose until it was level with the ledge. In moments, the whole area descended into chaos.

How did humans get here before me? Thel wondered. _I have only just now deactivated the barrier, yet humans have been able to somehow slip in prior to this and they have encountered the Parasite My mission has just got a great deal more complicated. _

**Authors note: Another chapter complete, thank goodness. I was able to produce this one much faster because there are no longer any imminent examinations, tests or other miscellaneous crap to contend with for the time being. But this is only a small gap â€“ real important exams in late April-May, my finals before I leave school to go onto University. History and Archaeology, that's my course. Not sure what to expect really but I hope I will be able to continue writing then. If all else fails, I may yet have a stab at writing as a job. You never know. This is certainly good practice. Anyway, enough of my ramblings â€“ hope you enjoyed the chapter. Please review as all constructive criticism is welcome. **

7. Chapter 7 - Rendezvous

Disclaimer â€“ No ownage of Halo here, at all.

_**Author's Note: Finally, another chapter is here! For everybody wishing to know what the MASSIVE delay was, there is another A/N at

the end of the chapter that explains all. Anyway, enjoy the chapter, guys!**_

The Arbiter's Tale

Chapter 7

Rendezvous

'Thel 'Vadamee leapt from the upper level of the gondola as several criss-crossing Sentinel beams seared over his head. Landing on the ground below, Thel rolled into cover behind a section of wall that protruded out towards the gondola. The whole area had been transformed into a chaotic brawl between an Enforcer with its Sentinel compatriots and a huge number of Flood combat forms. Both groups seemed more interested in attacking one another, so Thel was relatively safe from his position.

Thel fired a round from his Carbine into an oncoming combat form's chest, popping the controlling infection form within and causing the ex-human to smash into the wall beside Thel. Another combat form nearby heard the shot and turned but it met the same fate as its companion.

An Aggressor Sentinel rounded the wall that Thel crouched behind, seeking out the source of the shots, but Thel quickly smashed the butt of his carbine into the Sentinel, causing its shields to shimmer and sending it reeling back in the air. Before it could correct its orientation Thel fired a series of shots that wiped its shielding out and caused the machine to explode, sending fragments of metal onto the bodies of the combat forms.

Hearing a loud groan, Thel turned to see a large door opening nearby allowing several Sentinels to enter the area, beams cutting down the parasitic outbreak. Quickly scanning the area to ensure that nothing was directly in his way, Thel made haste towards it, pausing only to crush the combat form bodies.

* * *

><p>Private Lewis Cortes unloaded his shotgun into a charging monstrosity of diseased flesh and flailing tentacles. The thing disintegrated into several chunks of flesh that spattered the metal floor. Backing away, he fired several shots into a mass of the smaller bulbous forms â€“ the infectors. Cortes knew that if one of those made contact with you, it was game over as they transformed you into an unholy freak of nature not unlike that which he had just killed. Indeed he had destroyed the bodies of several fellow Marines that had fallen to the parasitic monsters.

"Sarge! We need to get the hell out of here!" Cortes bellowed above the din of several automatic weapons; the fellow surviving members of his squad as they tried to hold back the onslaught of alien parasites.

"The Sarge is gone, man!" Another Marine called back.

_Goddamn it! This situation is FUBAR. That bitch Commander Keyes ordered us here without having the goddamn courtesy to inform us about these creatures. _

_She probably didn't know about them either, _He relented. "Still, most of my platoon is dead, or trying to kill me, and I can only assume the others have met the same fate._

The mission had sounded simple enough: Deploy into the wall and drop the energy shield that surrounded the Library so that the main force could deploy armor into the area beyond the wall and establish a fortified presence while others pushed onward to the Library to retrieve the Index and prevent it from falling into the Covenant's hands. This was to prevent the aliens from activating the Halo ring, which would kill all sentient life in the galaxy. Cortes, like everybody else, had been ready to fight the Covenant, and so that was what they expected to find, no this wholly terrifying new species of alien.

The shield _had _been dropped, just not by the UNSC. Cortes could only assume the Covenant were the ones who had done it. Regardless, as soon as the barrier had been disabled, Cortes and his entire unit had been beset by _hundreds _of the small infectious creatures. Completely unprepared, many Marines had fallen before they had even realised what was happening.

The actual transformation of a human body was the most horrific thing Cortes had ever seen in his life. The small parasites forced themselves into their human hosts' chests, causing the body to rapidly disintegrate as the skin rotted and turned into a sickly yellowish-brown sludge - the same colour as the parasites - riddled with misshapen tumours and growths,. One arm would pretty much burst apart as a number of elongated claws or tentacles forced the hand aside and the neck would be broken and pushed aside as the controlling creature's tentacles protruded out of the chest, the red ganglia apparently controlling the corpse.

Cortes' platoon had fallen into disarray, with Marines becoming scattered. Many just ran, as if that would do any good, for the parasite was everywhere. Now the terrified private was accompanied by only a couple of other survivors who, desperately tried to hold back the onslaught.

Ultimately though, it was a futile effort as the monsters were simply too numerous. The two Marines with Cortes went down, one with his skull smashed courtesy of a parasite-controlled body and the other overwhelmed with crawlers.

Roaring in both anger and fear, Cortes backed against a wall and fired his shotgun again and again, destroying parasites and reanimated corpses until the gun clicked empty. With no time to reload he tossed it aside and drew his standard issue combat knife, slashing away until he was completely overwhelmed.

Cortes felt an excruciating pain as one crawler managed to sink its tendrils into his back. His pain was mercifully short-lived as the parasite tapped into his spinal cord, attacking his nervous system and ending his suffering almost instantly.

Almost instantly, the crawler rapidly burrowed into his chest. Cortes' skin began to rapidly decompose as unnatural growths started to appear all over his body as he fell. Cortes' left arm exploded into a huge claw-like structure as the parasitic crawler forced his

head aside as it made room in his chest, breaking bones and liquefying internal organs.

What was once Cortes climbed unsteadily to its feet, its head hanging limply beside the bulge that now housed the parasite. From this, the sensory tendrils of the crawler protruded, rapidly twitching as it detected its surroundings and decided what next to do with its host.

Lewis Cortes was now, like the rest of his platoon, dead. The former Marines body was now no more than a puppet for the exorable Flood army.

* * *

><p>Special Operations Commander Rtas 'Vadumee stood in the centre of the cavernous bay which housed Orbital Insertion pods, only one of many such rooms in the massive Holy City of High Charity. Satisfied that all present in the room could hear him, he addressed his team: over two hundred Special Operations Sangheili and an equivalent number of Unggoy fully clad in their respective armour and laden with weapons.</p>

"Brothers!" he boomed, his voice carrying around the launch chamber. Today we partake in the most important operation in our Covenant's history. We have the location of the Holy Ring's Sacred Icon, and it is our task to retrieve it. In doing this we bring glory to the Covenant and make the Great Journey possible, for the Icon allows us to light this most holy installation. The Journey is at hand, and it will be through our efforts that it will be achieved.

"This time, the Demon will not stop us! The Hierarch's will once again recognise the Sangheili as the iron fist of the Covenant! The Jiralhanae will be returned to the lowly positions that properly befits their savage race.

"We will be travelling to the ground by Orbital Pod, as it is imperative that we make landfall as soon as possible. As we land our forward dropship's will deploy stationery guns and combat barriers. We will set up a perimeter and await our vehicles which will be brought in shortly after. Once we are properly mobilized we shall make the push to the Library. We will be constantly reinforced as we go, as we aim to maintain a large ground presence.

"I know not what we will face, but if there is a human presence, it shall be eradicated. Such heretical creatures will **not** be allowed to take possession of the Icon.

"Is there any questions?" 'Vadumee's eyes swept the chamber, analysing each one of his warriors. Nobody said anything. Nodding in satisfaction, 'Vadumee turned to face the pods. "You all know what you have to do. Enter a pod and wait for my signal before launch. Dismissed."

His men immediately obeyed his command. The Sangheili entered singular capsules while the Unggoy packed into larger units designed to take four. 'Vadumee took a final look around the launch chamber, one of many in High Charity's expansive operations suites, before entering into a pod of his own.

'Vadumee waited for several more seconds, giving all of his troops time to secure themselves before activating his communications device and notifying the deckhand that they were ready to launch. He heard a short countdown, before a sudden sense of vertigo overtook him as the pod slid down the launch tube and then out of the Holy City.

The Special Operations team were now in space, at the mercy of their pods structural integrity and the ground far below. 'Vadumee was not fazed by this â€“ he had carried out hundreds of orbital deployments in his time in the Covenant military. In addition, their pods were far safer than the human's primitive equivalent. On multiple occasions, 'Vadumee had come across mangled human insertion units, with the twisted bodies of the humans still caged inside.

'Vadumee's pod's displays gave him a perfect view of the surrounding airspace. All around him, fellow Orbital Insertion Pods streamed down towards the surface of the Sacred Ring, leaving brilliant bluish contrails in their wake. From where he was, 'Vadumee had a magnificent view of the ring stretching up from the horizon, stretching far out of his line of vision where it completed itself thousands of miles above.

Temporarily overcome by religious fervor, 'Vadumee corrected himself and monitored the displays. They were not long from the ground. He could see a vast building in the distance. He knew this was the Library for he had been shown schematics of the exterior design prior to the drop. The huge facility screamed 'reverence' at 'Vadumee. It featured several large curved 'arms' that forked up from the base and whose tips faced one another at the apex, where a faint beam of light could be seen emanating from.

Our ultimate goal. For the glory of the Covenant.

Around the circumference of the Library was a massive wall, one which stood thousands of metres all and was designed to keep all external forces away from the Library and the holy Icon within. This was of no worry to 'Vadumee though, as a previous Covenant force had disabled the shield that had one extended from the wall to cover the Library.

'Vadumee angled his pod towards a large snow-filled gorge, and barked at his team to follow suit. The snow would cushion the impact of the pods landfall, and the gorge was open and easily defensible. Despite his command, the pods were still spread over a several kilometre radius and more than fifty percent of them missed the gorge.

'Vadumee activated his pod's landing jets which slowed down his descent, but the pod still crashed somewhat heavily on the snow covered ground. He grabbed his dual Plasma Rifles as the pods door hydraulics kicked in and sent it flying off. In a fluid movement, 'Vadumee leapt from his pod, sweeping the area with his weapons.

Around him, many more pods had landed. Thankfully most of them opened, their occupants jumping out. Some of them had unfortunately smashed into the sides of the gorge, killing the unfortunate commandoes inside. 'Vadumee eyed several corpses of his best Sangheili warriors and inwardly sighed.

The team formed up, every soldier scanning their sectors. They watched the cliff walls and caves for any signs of hostile activity. There was none. The low hum of a Phantom dropships engines met 'Vadumee's ears. He looked up and saw a trio of the bulbous ships entering the gorge. One carried several Shade guns on its undercarriage while another had a Deployable Lookout Tower. The third dropship carried several of the Covenant's reliable combat barriers which were ergonomically designed and allowed several soldiers to take cover. The Phantom's deposited their cargo before leaving to meet with other elements of the unit.

The team quickly set up their security measures. Several Sangheili jumped behind the controls of the Shades while a team of Unggoy ascended the lookout tower and set up their Plasma Cannons there. A Sangheili sniper went with them to provide over watch.

'Vadumee's second in command, Sub-commander Sila 'Cruolee stepped forward.

"Commander 'Vadumee, this sector is clear but I have received transmissions from other teams. They have spotted several human dropships and vehicles in the area. I suspect that they are after the Icon also. In addition there seems to be a heavy Sentinel presence in the area. I believe that they are defending the library, and are been distributed by those ships. 'Cruolee pointed up at the sky, and 'Vadumee followed his finger.

High up in the sky, perhaps several kilometres away, two ships hovered. They appeared to be basic in construction, yet were fairly gargantuan in size. The Sangheili race possessed excellent binocular vision, and so when 'Vadumee strained his eyes, he could see tiny dots continually leaving the ships. These would be the Sentinels, he surmised. He was thankful that they had many vehicles being deployed to the area, for a push through those numbers would be impossible on foot.

"Commander!" The sniper on over watch shouted. "We have hostile's incoming. It is the Parasite!"

'Vadumee cursed aloud. The damnable Flood parasite was once again upon them. How did they get here? 'Vadumee had a particular loathing for the Parasite. He had first encountered it during the mission at the first Sacred Ring. He had lead a mission to assist the Covenant Agricultural Ship _Infinite Succor _when it had been boarded in the ring's atmosphere. Initially believing it to be the humans doing, his team were faced with the horror of the Flood, an all-consuming race, the likes of which he had never come across before.

He had believed the Flood to have been wiped out by the Forerunners eons ago. The Flood consumed his entire team, and he himself had lost his two left mandibles to his own infected Sub-commander. There was no greater threat than the Parasite in the galaxy.

Were they on every Halo Ring?

Now it seemed as if the Flood were determined to hamper him, as his last mission with the newest Arbiter of the Covenant, former disgraced Supreme Commander Thel 'Vadamee had been complicated by the presence of the Parasite.

'Vadumee had served under Thel before, and knew him well. He was a good friend, and having witnessed his trial and subsequent branding, 'Vadumee believed that he had been judged too harshly over the debacle at Halo. However, it wasn't for him to say.

'Vadumee roared at his men to ready themselves. They had just finished taking up defensive positions when the first group of Flood crested the hilltop.

Wave after wave of the small Flood infection forms tumbled down the hill towards the Covenant defences. The small creatures all swarmed dogmatically towards their targets, not thinking or conducting any tactical genius — they were driven purely by their instinct to infest the Covenant troops.

The Covenant didn't need a command; they simply fired as the Flood came into view. Streams of plasma lashed out destroying swathes of the frail infection forms. Each time one was popped, several nearby forms would be similarly destroyed by the miniature explosion. This made it even easier to hold them back. More and more seemed to come however, and the snow was soon dusted with brownish smears of ichor and pieces of destroyed skin.

"Look, more approach from the cave!" howled 'Cruolee. Several troopers, 'Vadumee included turned to look. Surely enough, more Flood was pouring in from the small opening. This wave didn't include just infection forms however. 'Vadumee spotted several misshapen humanoid figures. They resembled human soldiers, but the Sangheili knew better. They were combat forms. Specifically infected humans.

'Vadumee saw the infection form nestled in the chest, the useless head hanging limply to one side and the thick, mutated clawed arm on one side of the corpse.

The other arm was relatively unchanged, and some of the combat forms wielded weapons in these limbs. Thel noticed that one or two carried human rocket launchers.

"Watch yourselves!" bellowed 'Vadumee. "Many of them have human heavy munitions. Target them first!"

Even as he shouted the order, he saw a rocket fly out of one of the launchers. The targeted Shade had no chance; the explosive completely destroyed it, sending pieces of metal and the charred corpse of the unfortunate Sangheili flying.

'Vadumee's dual Plasma Rifles blazed in concert with the rest of his unit, continuing to tear large gaps in the Parasite's numbers, but their numbers seemed to be infinite. He heard a horrific screech behind him, and turned. More Flood forms poured down the snowy embankment to the unit's rear, and the battle was joined.

* * *

><p>Thel's Plasma Rifles were out of ammo, and his Carbine was running dangerously low, so he feared that he would have to scavenge a human weapon off one of the Combat Forms. Normally, such an action was unthinkable to a member of the Covenant, as it was considered a terrible notion to use a human-manufactured weapon, and a warrior would sooner die than pick one up.</p>

Thel, however was no longer burdened by such dishonours. He had already endured his greatest shame in failing to protect the first Halo ring, so the use of a human weapon to aid him would not be able to bring much more dishonour to his name. In addition, it was crucial that Thel was to survive to retrieve the Sacred Icon from the Library, and he couldn't do this without a weapon.

Thel heard gunfire ahead, and he cautiously made his way towards the source. His communications unit crackled, but he was surprised when it was not Tartarus' voice, but that of a human. His translation software converted the human transmission into intelligible words, and Thel heard what sounded like desperate orders being given.

"Proceed to the objective, we'll hold out as long as we can!"

Thel reached a gap in the corridor's wall, and he looked across an open chasm towards an identical opening in the opposite side. Although his view was obscured by smoke, he could see gunfire and the shapes of several human soldiers as they tried to fight off a large group of infection forms and combat forms. Even as he looked, he heard pained screams as the infection forms latched onto the living humans.

"Argh! Argh! Get it off me!"

"Suppressive fire! Suppressive fire!"

More desperate gunfire erupted, before dying down as the humans were overwhelmed. Thel watched as many humans began to transform into combat forms. Turning away from the gruesome scene, Thel's eyes came to rest on a human shotgun lying beside the corpse of its previous owner.

The shotgun was the weapon in which the humans continued to use to their massive advantage in close quarters engagement with Covenant forces, and Thel had seen the damage it inflicted on those unlucky enough to be on its receiving end. In a second he had reached down, picked up the human weapon and scavenged several of the strange 'shells' that it used for ammunition.

Pressing forward, Thel came upon several more combat forms which were no match to the pump-action shotgun which destroyed their bodies. The gunfire attracted more from ahead, and these too met their end at Thel's hand. After moving on some more, he came upon the location where the humans had been overwhelmed. The ground was smeared with the humans red blood, and the walls were pockmarked with bullets testifying to their last stand.

The Sangheili encountered more combat forms, as well as several Sentinels ahead, and he was content to cloak himself and wait for the two sides to whittle one another down before mopping up survivors. He also came across several carrier forms, but the bloated Flood incubators were easily put down at range, and the infection forms were easy prey for the shotgun's wide spread.

Eventually finding another piston, Thel activated it and jumped down. He found himself on a ledge which extended out over a large chasm â€“ another gap in the expansive Sentinel Wall. Thel had an uneasy feeling that in powering down the shield to the Library, he had

unleashed the Flood parasite. He felt a moment of dread, realising that the Flood could easily spread as it had done on the first Halo ring, and once again he could be accountable for failure.

No. He told himself. Not this time. I shall not fail this mission. I will retrieve the Icon and in doing so, will allow the Covenant to begin the Great Journey.

The ledge was thick with Flood combat forms, which lurched about and did battle with several golden-plated Sentinels and an Enforcer which hovered out of the Flood's reach. The entire area was filled with criss-crossing projectiles, Sentinel beams and heavy needles. Occasionally a barrage from the Enforcer would come crashing down on the clustered Flood forms.

Deciding that engaging in combat was too risky, Thel triggered his active camouflage and darted from cover to cover across the room, giving the ancient armours cloaking time to recharge. Eventually he found another piston with the mangled remains of a human soldier lying nearby. Thel decided against wasting any time and he opened the piston before slipping in.

The first thing he noticed is that the area was heavily saturated with Flood spores — evidence that the Parasite was starting to terraform the area. Huffing in frustration, Thel ensured that his personal energy shield was fully powered, especially enhancing the shielding around his face to ensure that he didn't breathe any in. As a result of the parasitic infestation, visibility was very poor, with the only source of illumination being a glowing green conduit ahead. Thel made out a large pile of human military crates ahead and shambling about nearby was a number of combat forms.

There was no way that Thel would be able to sneak by with his limited active camouflage so he crept up on the nearest Flood form and blew it apart with the shotgun. The human weapon's booming report alerted the others in the room, and they soon began to swarm his location.

Backpedalling, Thel racked the shotgun's chamber and fired, tearing more combat forms apart. The Flood forms seemed to keep coming, and Thel's shotgun began to run out of ammunition. Firing his last couple of shots into onrushing combat forms, Thel tossed the empty weapon aside and lashed out with his large plated boot, disintegrating a final ex-human. Looking around, Thel picked up a human burst fire weapon. Known as a 'battle rifle' to the humans, the gun packed a surprising punch and was useful in putting combat forms down with a single burst aimed at the controlling infection form.

Thel followed the conduit to the right, proceeding carefully down the strange Forerunner ornamental wall sections and standing pillars. It was the perfect place for an ambush, and several times Thel was beset by lurking infection forms and combat forms leaping down from above.

Eventually making it to a small interior bridge, Thel moved hastily across, aware that there was nothing stopping him from taking a sudden plummet into the depths of the yawning gap except for his own carefulness. On this part of the wall, there was already combat raging, as evidenced by the sight of Sentinel beams and projectiles flashing in the otherwise dull, foggy room.

Thel was surprised by the sudden whine of plasma fire, and he looked up to see a burst of blue plasma bolts connect with a Sentinel, contorting its structure and causing the small machine to crash to the ground. Rounding the corner to confront the source, Thel found himself not finding any Covenant soldier, but yet another combat form. Unlike the ones he had been fighting up until this point, this was not a former human soldier.

It was a mutated Sangheili. Even though it was facing away from him, he could tell by the size and the fact that it was still adorned in pieces of Special Operations armour. In addition, he could see the dead Sangheili's head facing him, the neck bones having been liquefied during infection. The watery eyes seemed to bore into Thel's. He knew better; the head was useless to the combat form. Sighing, Thel opened fire on it. The Flood form twisted around, and raised its weapon.

Before it could get off a shot from its Plasma Rifle, a burst from Thel's rifle had already destroyed the infection form in the former Sangheili's chest. Without a sound, the corpse dropped to the ground, the Covenant rifle sliding out of its grasp. Despite the effectiveness of the human burst-fire weapon, Thel knew that if he did encounter any surviving Covenant forces, it wouldn't do for him to be seen using a heretical weapon, so the trade was necessary. He checked the charge.

84 percent. Good enough.

Satisfied, Thel raised the Plasma Rifle and pressed onwards, determined to see the end of this godforsaken wall.

* * *

><p>The situation at the Covenant rendezvous zone was looking dire. Despite their best efforts to hold back the tide of Flood, they seemed to be forever flowing in to assault them. Wave after wave of infection forms, combat forms and carrier forms continually rushed the line, with only several pauses of a couple of minutes occasionally. The number of remaining Covenant defenders was starting to dwindle, as Flood poured down the embankments on all sides of the camp, as well as from the various caves in the area and the large door that led to another section of the quarantine zone.</p>

Even worse, among the waves of attacking Flood, the commander, Rtas 'Vadumee began to see former Sangheili turned into combat forms. This was a sure sign that other Covenant forces had been overrun. Due to the large numbers of Flood attacking his camp, this seemed all the more likely.

A loud rumbling filled the air, momentarily distracting 'Vadumee from the ongoing battle. He looked up into the sky to see that one of the two large Sentinel producing ships had been struck by several plasma mortars. The ailing ship, which now had flame billowing from it, began to plummet towards the surface of the ring, leaving a thick trail of smoke in its wake. Who had shot it down, whether a Covenant unit, or the Flood was unknown to 'Vadumee.

"Commander!" shouted 'Cruolee. "I have received word that we have Phantoms inbound with vehicular support. They will be with us in

several minutes."

"Good! But we must hold out until then." 'Vadumee replied, firing several bursts from his rapidly depleting Plasma Rifles. The numbers of Flood attacking, many with heavy weapons had taken its toll â€“ the Special Operations team was down to a dozen Sangheili including the sub-commander and himself, and several Unggoy.

'Vadumee watched as several attacking Flood turned their attention from the team towards another threat. Plasma fire lashed out of a nearby cave, melting down the closest combat forms. The rest were put down by 'Vadumee's team. The Special Operations Commander watched as a Sangheili warrior adorned in strange, ornamental armour came out of the cave, followed by three more Sangheili. His eyes widened in surprise.

The Arbiter!

* * *

><p>Thel ran up to the familiar Sangheili in silver combat armour, who looked at him in confusion.</p>

"Arbiter!" Special Operations Commander 'Vadumee said. "What are you doing here?"

"My brother, I am on a mission directly from the Hierarchs themselves. I am to push through to the Library and retrieve the Sacred Icon. I must get there, for the hopes of all the Covenant rest upon depend on it."

"Ah!" Commander 'Vadumee nodded his head in acknowledgement. "It seems our objective is the same then, for we have been sent down from High Charity in order to secure a rendezvous zone before making for the Library. However I have lost many of my team to the Parasite's onslaught."

Suddenly an ear-splitting scream echoed through the valley. The remaining Covenant Special Operatives all raised their weapons in anticipation for the inevitable assault.

"The Flood is upon us!" called the sniper from the nearby Deployable Lookout Tower as he started to fire his Particle Beam Rifle at the Parasite.

"We must hold this camp until reinforcements arrive!" The Commander shouted to his troops, before turning to Thel. "We have vehicles coming in momentarily. We cannot hope to push through this quarantine zone without them."

**So, at long last, another chapter is up. Due to such things as finishing secondary school, working over the summer and starting a University degree course, I have had very little free time. Certainly not enough time to get these chapters produced as speedily as I would like. Semester 1 is almost over (hooray!), just the final exams to go and then its holiday time! Hopefully another chapter will be uploaded at some point during the holiday as I will have so much glorious free time (when I'm not playing Halo: The Master Chief Collection, however ;) Thank you 343 Industries! Right, enough of this rambling from me, hope you enjoyed the chapter!**

End
file.